

OLDBURY.

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OLDBURY

BY

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AUTHOR OF "JANET'S HOME," "CASTLE DALY," ETC.

'Well did the Wisest of our time write, 'It is only with Renunciation that Life, properly speaking, can be said to begin.'"—SARTOR RESARTUS.

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OLDBURY.

CHAPTER I.

MARGARET.

It was one of those clear days towards the end of October, when the sunshiny air has a pleasant keenness, and the newly turned-up earth a fresh, growing scent, which makes one feel as if one had slipped back through the long summer to the enjoyment of a pleasant April, or unusually genial March day. The two ends of the summer seemed to have met and shaken hands, for there were plenty of autumnal tokens to be noted, even in the suburban gardens that skirted the main road leading from the little town of Oldbury; laburnum trees raining down dark pods instead of flowers; holly berries showing red among their prickly leaves; bright dewy cobwebs festooning the primly cut privet hedges that divided the gardens from the road.

Old Mrs. Blake, who had come out in her shadiest poke-bonnet and brown holland gardening apron, to spend the afternoon in gathering flower-seeds, was not a person to pay much attention to any of these particulars; but she was taking advantage of the brightness of the day to stay out a good deal beyond her usual hour; and her little grand-daughter Elsie was beginning to be distracted from her happy observation of the road through the bars of the gate, by fears lest Grandmamma should at last notice how long the shadows were getting, and suddenly order herself and her little companion into the dull house behind.

Elsie had a strong secret conviction that Grandmamma liked to stand by that farthest garden bed (uncommanded by any of

the house windows) and look out into the road quite as much as she did, perhaps a little more; for looking out into the road seemed to be almost the only recreation that poor dear Grandmamma allowed herself; whereas Elsie could be equally happy trundling her hoop among the dry leaves, or making imaginary houses between the lilac bushes, where Grandmamma could not come.

The dissipation of looking out into the Oldbury main road was not one, apparently, to which the most ascetic person could reasonably object. The sights which pleased Mrs. Blake and Elsie were of an entirely unexciting and ordinary kind, such as might be seen from the same post of observation at any time, only to-day the broad white road, fringed on each side by pleasant garden shrubs, was flooded with a brighter than ordinary sunset light, and a few extra pedestrians had come out to enjoy it.

The little Lutridges, with their attendant nurses, man-servant, and donkey, wended slowly up the road to the imposing white house at the top of the hill. Six children Elsie counted, and wondered how it must feel to have five playmates instead of one Grandmamma.

Then Mr. Pierrepont, the rector of Oldbury, passed the gate, and little Miss Berry, who was on the watch for him, and who so nearly missed him by stopping to kiss the youngest little Lutridge, that Mrs. Blake could scarcely refrain from calling out, darted across the road, and detained him in eager conversation for full ten minutes, almost within earshot of Elsie's post of observation.

"I wonder what Miss Berry wants," Elsie observed, when she had watched several sidelong attempts of Mr. Pierrepont to bow himself away, and admired Miss Berry's clever generalship in keeping her advantageous position in full command of the pathway. "Whatever it is, I hope Mr. Pierrepont will let her have it. I wish he would not make himself so tall to her. I have seen him quite short when he was speaking to Mrs. Lutridge. Have not you, Granny? Ah, he has got away! and I am afraid Miss Berry is disappointed, for she is looking after him, and her curls are shaking so!"

Granny approached the garden gate to get a better view of what was going on; and Miss Berry, catching sight of two interested faces turned in her direction, came up to exchange a neighbourly greeting.

Of course they wanted to know what she and Mr. Pierrepont

had been talking about. It would not have been considered neighbourly in Oldbury not to want to know everything that one's acquaintance said to each other, and Miss Berry would have felt alone in the world, indeed, if she could have passed a day without having to account for her sayings and doings to some one. She plunged at once into the expected explanation.

"Yes," she said, "I don't suppose you can have overheard much; but I have no doubt you have guessed. It *was* about the mother of the boy who threw a stone at Mrs. Lutridge's donkey that I have been speaking to Mr. Pierrepont. Do I look a little ruffled? My dear, I know it is the old Adam in me rising up; but to have it hinted to one by one's clergyman that one is talking nonsense, is enough to flutter one's spirits. I daresay I did not express myself very clearly, for it is a most agitating business indeed. Dearest Mrs. Lutridge's donkey! stoned by a boy, whose mother is receiving relief from the fund! What a conjunction of circumstances! When one thinks of the numbers of donkeys in Oldbury that might just as well have been hit instead of hers, and of the boys throwing stones continually, whose mothers are not on the sick-fund, one sees how fearfully active and ingenious the enemy of mankind must be. If there are any infidels in Oldbury who doubt his 'finding mischief still,' I should just like to put the case to them."

Mrs. Blake not being an infidel, however, the conversation was allowed to take a less argumentative turn; and Elsie was presently despatched to the house by Grandmamma to fill Miss Berry's flat basket with broken meat for the sick woman, in order to soften the news of her rejection from the fund.

She looked so brilliant with health, and satisfaction in her own doings, when she returned from her rapid journey, that Miss Berry could not resist taking the rosy, glowing face between her hands and bestowing a hearty kiss upon it.

She did not say in words how fair a sight, the dimpled cheeks, the laughing mouth, the blue eyes looking back at her, were in her estimation, but every line of her good-humoured face expressed admiration, and Elsie was not by any means slow in reading it there.

"I like Miss Berry very much, Granny," she said, as she watched the little lady's brisk figure moving down the street; "and I wish Aunt Margaret would let her come to see us oftener; but, after all, I like you better than any one. You don't worry about things as other grown-up people do. You and I are happy, Granny; but other people are not. We like being

together in the garden, better than sitting with Grandpapa and Aunt Margaret in the house—don't we?"

Elsie jumped down from the gate as she spoke, and threw her arms round Granny's slim waist; but Mrs. Blake did not take the caress or the compliment in quite such good part as usual.

"Yes, it's all very well for us to be out together; but we don't forget those that are in the house. It's a toilsome world, Elsie, and people must work and be sorrowful in it."

"It's a very pretty world out of doors, I think," Elsie said, staring up through the drooping yellow laburnum leaves, now burnished into gold by the sunset light, to the deep blue of the sky above; "and if you and I could always play out in the garden, and Grandpapa and Aunt Margaret *always* sit writing in the library without ever coming out, I think we should be very happy in it."

"Hush, hush, child," Granny said, with a quick shake of her head, and a look of pain crossing her kind face, "you must not speak so. It is time to go in now. Grandpapa will have finished writing, and will want me. Come."

Elsie turned to pick up the seed-basket; and, as she could always catch up Grandmamma, she mounted the gate again to take a last look at the out-door world Granny had so strangely maligned.

The outlook from her grandfather's garden gate, down the little old-fashioned town street, and away over its grey house-tops to the bare green hills beyond, had attractions for her such as might not have been felt by a less solitary child.

She watched the little lights starting up one behind the other down the long vista of the street, the trees in the old church-yard grouping themselves together into strange shapes as the twilight deepened, and the last rays of the sun spreading upward from behind the western hills, like a great golden fan tapering fainter and fainter, and losing itself in the sky; and then she heaved a great sigh of full satisfaction. "Good-bye, beautiful day! come back to us again," she whispered, as she jumped down to the ground, and set off to run across the grass-plot, so as to meet Mrs. Blake at the front door.

Elsie did not wish to enter the dusky hall of the old house in the twilight alone. It was one of the oldest houses in Oldbury, and had been built in times when the ancient town was a place of greater importance, and owned richer inhabitants than was the case at present. A part of the building had been pulled

down when the Blakes came to live there, but the passages and staircase were still more in accordance with the past than the present pretensions of the place.

The wide entrance-hall, with its white and black pavement, was a favourite resort of Elsie's later on in the evening, when the swinging lamp from the ceiling was lighted, and old Mr. Blake came from his study to take his nightly promenade up and down the length of the hall, his hands clasped behind him, and his head bent down, abstractedly muttering as he walked. Elsie liked then to curl herself up on one of the shallow stairs, and find amusement in wondering what sort of a story Grand-papa was telling himself; but now she preferred following Granny to the dullest room in the house—the study where Mr. Blake and Margaret spent so much of their time together.

The sound of Margaret Blake's clear voice reading aloud was what one usually heard as soon as the study door was opened; just now there was silence in the room.

Margaret was seated at the window, with a closed book lying on her lap, and Mr. Blake leaned back in his arm-chair by his high writing-desk, his thin white fingers, from which a pen had rolled away, resting idly on an open sheet of paper before him.

Mrs. Blake went up to him, put her arm round his head, and stroked the grey hair hanging low on his neck, with a tender reverential gesture, such as she might have used timidly for the first time to different coloured locks, many long years ago.

"Well, dear," she said cheerfully, "you have been getting on well with your writing as usual while I have been away."

"Yes, you are right, my dear. I have been getting on; at least I think so," Mr. Blake answered, sitting a little more upright, and speaking in the wide-awake tone, which was now only heard from him when he answered a question of his wife's.

"Oh, I know it; you have been getting on beautifully, you and Margaret together," Mrs. Blake continued, drawing her hand again and again down the grey hair, and nodding towards Margaret, who turned her head languidly at the mention of her name. "But now you are both very tired, and you have nearly let the fire out between you, as you two always do, and the room looks quite dismal. You must come to the drawing-room with me at once, and Margaret will follow when she has put your papers away."

Elsie ran out of the room after Mr. and Mrs. Blake, to seek

the cheerful companionship of the old servant Crawford in the kitchen ; and Margaret, left alone, sat long in the window-seat, watching the deepening of the twilight into darkness, before she roused herself and began her task. Every evening Margaret Blake carefully arranged and put away papers on which her father had jotted down abstruse problems he had spent the day in working. Every morning she arranged his desk with books and mathematical instruments for the same work to begin again, and nearly all day she remained by his side, to give what help she could by writing, or reading aloud for him.

There had been a time when this task had been gloried in by Margaret as the proudest privilege of her life. She had been her learned father's pupil from earliest childhood, and when Mr. Blake resigned a public office he held, in order to devote his whole time to the completion of a treatise on an abstruse scientific question, to which he had long given much thought, she made it a first object with herself to lighten his labour, and to that end sacrificed every other pursuit and interest.

Several years of patient study passed without any weariness to her. She had made herself capable of following, to a certain extent, the workings of her father's mind. She saw the obstacles to the success of his work which had to be overcome ; she was always at hand to buoy up his heart with hope when it was ready to fail ; she threw herself into his ambition with that enthusiasm, born of combined devotion to the worker and glory in the work, the capacity for which makes some women such valuable associates in prolonged mental labour.

At length, after many disappointments, the hour that was to bring reward approached. Her father pronounced his undertaking all but completed. A few experiments had to be verified, a few months must be given to patient revision of the earlier portions of his book, and then the result of so much study was to be given to the world. Margaret's heart danced for joy. She was childishly, wildly happy. She opened her heart to delights of companionship which she had carefully excluded hitherto. A sweet, clear future, all golden, with a new, hitherto undreamed-of light, seemed to be opening out before her.

And then a crushing family calamity fell upon them all. It swallowed up Margaret's prospects, and so much else, that her own private share of the sorrow was scarcely recognized by any one.

After the first confusion of misery was over, when they had separated themselves from the old scenes, and broken every link

with those who could, by a chance word, recall old joys and present pain, Mr. Blake had the courage to resume his long suspended labour, and Margaret fell into her old habit of waiting upon him. For some months the assistance she gave was chiefly mechanical, so that a considerable interval elapsed before she perceived that while her father devoted as much time as ever to his studies, he was making no real progress. His mind, shattered by suffering, was no longer equal to deal with the questions on which he was engaged. One day's work was little better than a repetition of the last, and it became clearer, week by week, that the final revision, without which his previous labour was useless, would never now be given to his great book.

The discovery was not so crushing a blow to Margaret, as any one who had known her a year before would have supposed. The great work was nothing to her now ; if her father had been capable of completing it after what had happened, she could not have sympathized with him as she did in contemplating his failure. She had at one time absorbed herself too much in intellectual pursuits, and now nature avenged herself, and she could see nothing in the world but the individual suffering and wrong-doing with which she had been suddenly brought face to face. If her father had been working successfully, she could hardly have borne to help him. To be the sharer of his resultless labour was sweeter to her than any other occupation she could have had now.

The little dark study which Elsie found so gloomy was a harbour of refuge to her. She could look back on the past most calmly there, and was there sheltered from the petty cares and annoyances that had come with the new life.

When she had finished putting the books away she sat down on the hearth-rug with her hands clasped round her knees, and looking intently into the red caves of the dying fire, saw the course of her past life unroll itself before her. A quiet, smoothly spun, richly coloured thread of life it ran on, till a sudden blow divided it. Then it had to begin again.

Margaret could just then look at the contrast between the two eras quietly, as if she were following the events of another person's life, and unconcernedly speculating what the end would be. Even when the last faint spark died out in ashes, she could not bring herself to move, till Elsie had twice been to the door to summon her to the drawing-room, where the lamp was lighted, and they were waiting tea for her.

"It is not a sign that grown-up people have been naughty when they sit alone in the dark, I know, Aunt Margaret," Elsie said, slipping her hand into Margaret's as they crossed the hall together; "but I wish you did not like the dark so much. I wish you liked warm pretty places and merry people as much as I do."

"We each like what suits us, I suppose," said Margaret, stooping down to kiss the child's beaming upturned face. Elsie tripped across the hall, half-awed, half-pleased at the unusual favour of a quite voluntary caress from grave, stately, beautiful Aunt Margaret.

CHAPTER II.

OLDBURY AT CHURCH.

THE Blakes had been living in Oldbury two years when our story begins, and during that period they had conferred a great boon on its inhabitants, by affording a constant subject for conversation at all their social meetings. Everybody in the town knew the members of the family by sight, and many of them could have passed a creditable examination on their habits, the hours at which they took their meals, the contents of their wardrobes, and their weekly consumption of butcher's meat and groceries; but no one, except Miss Berry, had ever, in all that time, been invited to enter their house, or succeeded in passing beyond the limits of the most formal acquaintanceship. By dint of much nodding and smiling, Miss Berry had established a right to enter into conversation with Mrs. Blake and Elsie whenever she met them; and was occasionally, after a walk, invited to come in and spend part of the afternoon in chat with Mrs. Blake.

At such times she had momentary glimpses, through the open study door, of old Mr. Blake seated at his desk, and of Margaret reading aloud to him; and once or twice Margaret had bowed ceremoniously to her when they encountered each other in the hall.

This was not much, but it was so much more than was vouchsafed to any one else in the town, that Miss Berry was uneasy lest she should be puffed up by such distinction, or tempted by her desire to satisfy the natural curiosity of less favoured acquaintances, to give minuter details than actual observation warranted.

A great deal of pity was bestowed on Elsie Blake by the

Oldbury people, which she did not altogether need. It went to Miss Berry's heart to meet her, taking her daily walk, hand-in-hand with Aunt Margaret. It would indeed have been a terrible cross to Miss Berry to have had to walk an hour every day beside silent Margaret Blake, the very sight of whose beautiful grave face froze up even her perpetual current of speech; but Elsie could patter along, hanging on to Margaret's hand, and amuse herself quite happily by peering down into the holes in the hedgebank, and wondering what sort of an underworld she should find, if she could only make herself small enough to creep down them; or by building castles in the air, about the splendid orange groves, and fair Rosamond bowers, that probably lay behind the high garden walls she passed nearer the town.

When the afternoon walk was over, and she retired into the kitchen to play with the cat, and edify Crawford by reading aloud a chapter in Rollin's *Ancient History*, she had visions of the houses and people she had seen in her walk still in her eye, and realized the ancient kings and heroes all the more vividly for seeing them dressed in the clothes, and walking about in the familiar ways of actual acquaintanceship.

Between studying and dreaming her time would have passed pleasantly enough, if it had not been for one unattainable desire that frequently troubled her.

During her walks, and while she was peering through the garden gate, she sometimes encountered sly glances from eyes on a level with her own, that made her heart beat very quickly, and caused a lump to rise in her throat.

In all her life she had never, that she could remember, spoken to any one of her own size, and at times a terrible longing came over her, just once, to break away from Margaret and join the rosy groups of children, who stopped their play on the road to stare at her. Would they acknowledge her as one of their company? Elsie wondered; she did so want to be taken into fellowship by some one. The grown-up people at home showed her plainly enough that they did not consider her one of them.

"You are but a child," Crawford used to say when Elsie had posed her with an inconvenient question. "You are a child," Margaret would exclaim in a tone of wonder, when Elsie's gay laugh reached her ears. "You are a child, darling—a child still," Grandmamma had a way of saying over and over again, as she twisted Elsie's crisp golden curls round her finger. "How pleasant!" Elsie thought, to be in a society where the fact

of being a child would not be singular enough to be remarked upon so constantly.

Once, when she and Crawford were walking down Oldbury High Street on a marketing expedition, they were stopped by Mrs. Lutridge, with six little daughters following, two and two behind. "So this is the little Blake child," Mrs. Lutridge said, forcing up Elsie's reluctant chin with her resolute forefinger. "Do you know who I am? I am Mrs. Lutridge! You should stand still when you are spoken to, and not try to wriggle away into the gutter. If your grandmamma had taken my advice, and let you attend my class at the Sunday-school with my own children, you would have known how to behave, and we should all have been fond of you. It is a great pity you keep away; it grieves us all to see such an unformed, awkward child in Oldbury. You may tell your grandmamma that Mrs. Lutridge says so."

The very sky darkened over Elsie's head as Mrs. Lutridge spoke, and her eyes filled with tears as she watched her walk away, followed by her train of daughters, no one of whom condescended to glance at Elsie, standing mute in the gutter, with her shy finger in her mouth. After that encounter Elsie began to feel afraid of the children who played in the road; they might shake their heads at her, and say she was not a proper Oldbury child. She also noticed, as she had never done before, many little ways in which the habits of her household differed from others. She observed that Margaret never nodded to passers-by as Miss Berry did. Even when Mr. Pierrepont raised his hat to her (and Elsie fancied he lifted it higher for Margaret than for any other lady in the town), she did not look pleased. She moved her head the least little bit in the world, and lowered her eyes gravely.

Other people's door knockers looked bright and shining, as if they were always being lifted up, but theirs remained stiff and rusty in its place all the year round. The opposite neighbours sometimes had four or five sets of visitors in one afternoon; Elsie, seated at her bed-room window, counted them. Ladies came with children by their sides, who were welcomed by noisy playmates, and carried in triumph to upper regions, where Elsie saw their merry faces looking from the windows; but no one of all the number ever seemed to think of crossing the road and lifting the latch of their gate.

Sometimes Elsie brooded over these things till she grew almost sad—at others she forgot all about them, and was happy

in her own way; but, whatever mood she was in, she felt glad when Sunday came, for on that day of the week the Blake family laid aside their singularity, and took part in what everybody else was doing.

Elsie enjoyed the walk to church, towards which so many other happy looking families were hastening, and the services were not a bit too long for her—she enjoyed the sense of companionship so much. It must be confessed she looked about her a good deal, and gathered much knowledge of her contemporaries among the congregation, to brood over during the week.

There were few eyes in Oldbury church that could help returning with kindly glances the wistful gaze that fell on them, Sunday after Sunday, from the bright-haired child in the mourning dress, who stood up among the other dark-robed figures in the Blakes' pew; and Elsie's little heart danced with pleasure sometimes, she felt as if she had so many friends.

Old Mrs. Blake's eyes were a little given to wandering too; but she did not find that the knowledge she gained by studying the faces of her neighbours at all hindered the fervour of her prayers.

When the thanksgiving came she could join all the better in it for knowing that the matron, whose absence from church for several Sundays had occasioned her some uneasiness, was seated at the head of her flock once more, pale, but happy-looking; and that the sad faced widow in the free seats, with whom she regularly exchanged a glance at a certain sentence in the Litany, had her sickly boy at home again from school.

The electric current of kindness flowing out of her eyes, and returned by her nameless friends, kept a glow of warmth round her heart that the unsociable character of her week-day life might have chilled. Holding Elsie's hand in hers, as they stood up and knelt and sat down together, old Mrs. Blake had no heart to check the little one's roving glances, even when Mrs. Lutridge made it quite plain that their frequency met with her disapproval.

Margaret and Mr. Blake sat on the opposite side of the pew, and seemed bent on bearing testimony against the offences of the other two, by maintaining a perfect unconsciousness of the presence of any one in the church but themselves. Yet their conduct did not entirely escape Mrs. Lutridge's animadversions. The charge against them was that they did not look, and

seemed as if they would never learn how to look, like Oldbury people.

No one could have pointed out precisely where the fault lay, but even kind Miss Berry could not successfully defend them from the charge; and strangers to Oldbury were apt to ask who they were, directly the sermon was ended, and thus expose the inhabitants to the mortification of furnishing unsatisfactory information. They hardly deserved severe blame for this, however, as the attraction they exercised was entirely of a passive nature. Mr. Blake could not help his tall thin figure towering over the edge of the pew, higher than most of the other male figures. He lessened his height to the best of his power, by the stoop of his shoulders and the down-drooping posture in which his grey head habitually fell. The Oldbury people were hardly observant enough to be much struck by the beautiful shape of the bowed head, certainly very unlike any other in Oldbury, or the scholar-like refinement of the thin features they seldom saw but in profile.

He stood up, and sat down, and knelt, at Margaret's instigation, usually in a mechanical dreamy sort of way; but now and then the whole congregation were startled by hearing from his corner of the pew a deep voice repeating a word or two of a Psalm, or a response, with a strange, passionate, wailing emphasis, that broke upon the even, mechanical repetitions of the decorous worshippers with an uncomfortable sort of thrill.

"Old Mr. Blake might have been a great sinner in his youth; he most probably had been," Mrs. Lutridge said, "and it was satisfactory to know that he was troubled by a sense of his past misdeeds; but, as Oldbury was not used to great sinners, except in the free seats, it would have shown a more becoming deference to the rest of the congregation if he had restrained his feelings better."

Mr. Blake always subsided completely at sermon time, and sat with his hands behind him, and his eyes immovably fixed on one particular square of the chancel pavement; but Margaret threw back her crape veil when Mr. Pierrepont got into the pulpit, and lifted her large brown eyes to the preacher. Considering that the Blakes' pew was precisely in front of the pulpit, and that Margaret was taller, and had a more beautiful complexion, and blacker hair than any one else in Oldbury, the ladies thought it would have been better taste in her to keep her veil down during all the service. A good many eyes in various parts of the church watched for the raising of that

crape veil, but the delicate peach bloom in Margaret Blake's cheek never varied by a shade, however many people were looking at her.

She lifted her veil at that period of the service because she wanted air, and found that listening to the sermon was a safer occupation for her than following her own thoughts; but if anything could have made her smile, it would have been the notion of her being affected in any way by glances from Oldbury eyes. She never drooped her head, having once raised it; for she had acquired a habit of remaining immovable for long periods in a posture she had once assumed, but a close observer might frequently see that the effort to attend was not a very successful one.* The raised brown eyes had a stony, indrawn look that told of thoughts very far away. Now and then, however, a sudden life sprang into them. A word of the preacher's had arrested her attention, and she waited for the next sentence as if she expected it would solve some problem for her, or strengthen her hold on some half-despairing hope. Her whole face took an anxious imploring look at such times, as if life, or what was more to her than life, hung in the balance, and might be decided by the next spoken words.

The sudden animation often died out as quickly as it came; but it was frequent enough to awaken the preacher's interest in so intelligent a hearer, and to dispose him to glance downwards towards the Blakes' pew while delivering the most emphatic sentences of his discourse more frequently than strict justice warranted.

Unfortunately, Oldbury had a habit of watching the direction of these glances rather jealously. There was only one pew in the church towards which Mr. Pierrepont had every lady's leave to look as often as he liked.

This was the rectory pew, where Sunday after Sunday the widower clergyman's only son sat in solitary state. When he had first made his appearance there under his nurse's charge—a curly haired boy of three, over whom Mrs. Lutridge, from the pew behind, exercised careful supervision—he had been by far the most conspicuous and interesting object in the church to every female eye. There used to be quite a flutter of white handkerchiefs whenever any allusion occurred in the sermon to early piety, or little Samuel, or Timothy's knowledge of the Scripture. If, in mentioning these subjects, Mr. Pierrepont failed to glance momentarily towards his own chubby faced little son, whom Mrs. Lutridge had perched on a high cushion on purpose that

he might be convenient to look at, the ladies felt themselves defrauded of a pleasant sympathetic emotion, and went home with a less exalted idea of the tenderness of their pastor's heart than it pleased them to have. But boys, even the sons of widowed clergymen, cannot be kept at the curly headed interesting stage beyond a certain number of years, and at the time when Margaret Blake became a regular attendant at Oldbury church, Steenie Pierrepont had grown much too big to be perched on cushions, and had developed a disposition to spin buttons in sermon time, in defiance of Mrs. Lutridge, which was enough to discourage the most solicitous of fathers from preaching at him. He was a handsome, open faced lad, whom people could not help liking; but it had to be acknowledged, even by Mrs. Lutridge, that he was not growing up as much like little Samuel as Oldbury had expected of him.

Elsie's attention was first drawn towards the solitary boy in the red lined pew by sympathy for him, as a fellow-sufferer under Mrs. Lutridge's active supervision.

She quite understood the feeling that made him twist himself into the darkest corner of the pew, and grow suddenly red in the face, when a glance from the pulpit chanced to be directed towards him, and Mrs. Lutridge's emphatic hand on his shoulder impressed the fact upon him; and on sunny mornings, when the sermon was longer than usual, she was kept in a continual state of anxiety on his account, so daring were the manœuvres by which he sought to work off the superfluous activity that possessed him.

One fine February morning, when the sun and the west wind had made all the children's hearts dance, by promising to bring summer to Oldbury all at once, an antiquated white butterfly woke in a corner of the old church, and began its summer career by paying bewildered visits to the flowers in the ladies' spring bonnets. Elsie's and Steenie's eyes met once or twice, in their rapturous following of the intruder's erratic flights; and at last Elsie grew so absorbed in watching a daring effort of Steenie's to capture the prize, when it rested on a bunch of yellow roses in Mrs. Lutridge's bonnet, that she let a heavy hymn book she was holding fall to the ground.

Mrs. Lutridge stood up to frown at her, and, covered with confusion, she crouched down, and hid her face on Grand-mamma's shoulder. But when all was quiet again, her interest in the butterfly obliged her to raise her head and peep over the pew side, just to see what had become of it.

Steenie was holding it lightly between his finger and thumb, and, as she looked up, he actually stretched out his hand to show it to her.

Their eyes met and spoke to each other quite unmistakeably now. Question and answer quicker than words could have conveyed them. Then the finger and thumb parted. The butterfly fluttered up above Mr. Pierrepont's head, carrying the children's eyes with it. They met again coming down; the boy's bright, bold eyes brimming over with fun, and quite confidently claiming Elsie's companionship in his amusement. It was a wonderful joy to Elsie.

"We are children," Steenie's eyes had said to her, instead of the old sentence she had heard so often, "You are a child."

She had made one real living acquaintance in the child world; and the dreams and visions she moved among every day took a sort of substance from that recollection, which made them more satisfying.

CHAPTER III.

ALICE PAMELA NEALE.

THE monotony of the life led by the Blake household had two noticeable breaks in it.

At a certain time in the early spring, and again in the autumn, Mr. and Mrs. Blake and Margaret left home together, and were absent several days.

They never spoke to each other or to Elsie about this journey before the day of their departure came, or alluded to it in the most distant manner on their return; but Elsie gradually learned to understand certain premonitory signs which showed her what was about to happen.

She knew what she had to expect when, on peeping through the bed-curtains in the morning, she saw Margaret occupied in transferring some of the contents of her drawers to a small portmanteau that only saw the light at those two seasons of the year. Elsie generally laid her head back on the pillow and drew the curtain aside, that she might watch all Margaret's movements.

To see her do something she did not do every day in the year was in itself quite interest enough; and as Elsie grew older the very thought of going beyond Oldbury, of actually seeing what was in the world behind the grey hills, had a charm for her, which made the invisible things that were to share the journey worth looking at.

Elsie concluded that Margaret always put precisely the same things in her portmanteau; for she never seemed to be thinking of what she was doing while she filled it. Her face was stiller, colder, more impenetrable than usual on these mornings. A slight frown often contracted her forehead; but it seemed quite

involuntary, as if some physical pain brought it there. When she had finished packing, she came to the bed, and called Elsie, and helped her to wash and dress, precisely as she did every day.

Elsie could not help feeling a little provoked, while Margaret went through the usual routine. It seemed such a pity that a journey should be thrown away upon her who (Elsie thought) could not care about anything. The departure of the three travellers never occurred till the middle of the day. There was not any pleasant, excited bustle of preparation in the house, but there was a general air of unusualness everywhere, which made the day seem to Elsie like the concentrated essence of Sunday.

Old Mr. Blake paced up and down the hall with his hands behind him; not looking down dreamily and talking to himself, according to his ordinary habit, but keeping his lips closed, and showing with his eyes a consciousness of Elsie watching him from the second stair, that was far less comfortable than his usual perfect abstraction.

Sometimes he used to pause in his walk at the foot of the staircase close to Elsie, put out his thin white hand, lay it on Elsie's head, and remain quite a minute looking down into her face as if it had been a book he was reading. Elsie felt very frightened when he did that.

Grandpapa's eyes, which generally seemed as if they saw nothing, used to grow very large and dark and sad, she fancied, while he stood looking at her; then he used to shake his head, and sigh very loud, and begin his walk again, tottering a little at the first step or two.

What could be the matter with her face, Elsie wondered, to trouble such an old man as Grandpapa so much; she wished she dare ask him not to look at her in that way, or that she could get quite a new face before the next time.

She could seldom bring herself to endure more than two such inspections, before she deserted her post on the stairs, and retired to Grandmamma's bedroom, where Mrs. Blake always shut herself up with Crawford, till the carriage that was to take them to the station came round to the door. Elsie could understand Grandmamma's demeanour in the prospect of a journey better than Margaret's. She was almost as much excited as Elsie herself would have been; there was always a bright spot of colour on each of her cheeks; and her hands shook so at the last moment, that Crawford had to tie her bonnet and pin her shawl round her. Then, before leaving the room, Grandmamma turned

round and took a long look at herself in the cheval glass, that stood in a dark corner of the room. No one but Elsie even noticed the glass except on those travelling days, but then Grandmamma put her face quite close to it, and smoothed back her grey hair, and pulled the soft lace of her cap into pretty folds round her face.

"I don't look so very old, Crawford," Elsie heard her say once; "not like a broken-down woman, old before my time. I am not so very much altered as to be a reproach to any one."

Crawford had to hurry Grandmamma from the room at last, and when she got down stairs Grandpapa and Margaret were waiting for her—Margaret, with her thickest veil drawn over her face, but Mr. Blake wearing a look of determination and presence of mind that for the moment made him seem to have changed places with Grandmamma.

Child as she was, Elsie perceived that just on these occasions it was he who took charge of the others, and that they looked up to him and turned to him for directions, as they never did at any other time. It was he who gave the word when they were to go. He put Margaret into the carriage first, and then came back for Mrs. Blake, and once (in the spring of the year of which we are speaking), when Elsie, in her curiosity, ran to the gate to see the carriage start, she noticed that as they drove away he held one of Grandmamma's hands and one of Margaret's in his, and that he was talking earnestly to them. Could Margaret be crying under her veil? Elsie wondered, as she walked back through the garden when the carriage was out of sight. There had certainly been a suspicious round bright drop on her dark dress; Elsie had seen it fall. But Margaret crying! Margaret, whose face so seldom changed, crying because she was going to leave the dark house and be carried away up those swelling soft purple hills beyond the town, and down into the unknown wonder-world behind them, which Elsie so longed to see. Oh! she would not believe such a sorrowful thing. She put the thought far from her, and danced back to the house again, jumping up to catch the budding ends of the laburnum shoots as she passed under the trees, and finding a hundred excuses for lengthening the journey.

Already, when Elsie re-entered the house, the sort of change had come over it which she recognized as the natural consequence of the absence of its master and mistress. The air seemed to be lighter, the sunshine freer to look round and penetrate into all

the corners. The hush that usually reigned everywhere was broken by brisk commonplace sounds.

Crawford had lost no time in calling in a band of active coadjutors, and setting on foot the half-yearly turn-out of the whole house, in directing which she indemnified herself for having, during the rest of the year, no one to order about but Grandmamma and Elsie.

She had set all the windows in the house open; the spring wind was fluttering the papers on Mr. Blake's desk, and blowing the dust from his book-shelves, and two red armed damsels had taken Margaret's place in the study, and were chatting and laughing over their work of pulling down the dingy brown curtains which shut out the sunshine, and made summer and winter alike there.

Elsie enjoyed the bustle quite as much as Crawford. She wandered through the transformed rooms, and made friends with the strange work-people, puzzling them sorely with her questions. When Crawford interfered, as she did now and then, and banished her from the scene of action, she found Grandpapa's study a pleasant place to retire to, now that the furniture, which usually seemed to look gravely at her with Aunt Margaret's eyes, was safely covered up, and ladders were perched against all the book-shelves.

On the day before the travellers returned, Elsie betook herself to the study early in the afternoon, and became so engrossed by a discovery she made there, that she had no idea how late it was, when Crawford, suspicious of the long quiet, put her head into the study door and called her.

The corners of the room were growing uncomfortably mysterious, and the draped furniture looked awful in the middle of the room when Elsie looked up, at the summons, so she made haste to replace a little heap of volumes she had been studying, and ran up into Aunt Margaret's room, where Crawford was busy sewing rings on to the bed-curtains. The candle light looked quite cheerful, and Elsie was glad to have it and Crawford's company, while she followed out some thoughts her afternoon's discovery had roused in her mind.

She leaned her arms on the table, and watched the sewing on of half a dozen rings in silence. Then she said suddenly—

"Crawford, do you know a girl called Alice Pamela Neale, aged ten? did she ever live in this house? and why are all her pretty story books hidden away in that darkest corner of the study, behind Grandpapa's great red dictionary?"

Crawford let the curtain rings fall to the floor as Elsie spoke, and did not make any attempt to answer till she had picked them up again, one by one; then she said, in an unconcerned tone of voice—

"Whatever do you mean, Miss Elsie? how should I know anything about what's behind your Grandpapa's books?"

"O Crawford, you are very tiresome," cried Elsie; "when ever I ask a question you pretend not to understand. You might be kind just once. I never wanted anything so much as I want to know about Alice Pamela Neale. Do tell me where she is. I know there is such a girl. She has a father and a mother, and two brothers, and they all give her books on her birthdays, and she draws funny pictures of them under their names. Oh, if she would only come back here one day to fetch her story books I could show her where they are. Do you think she will ever come back, Crawford?"

Crawford shook her head. "There is no such person, Miss Elsie; you must not think any more about her. I was afraid you were in mischief this afternoon; but I'd no notion you'd managed to rout out them books. Whatever would Miss Margaret say?"

"Did Aunt Margaret hide them?" said Elsie. "Did she take them from the little girl? Crawford, there must have been some one who drew those pictures and read the books. Do, do tell me where she is now."

"Well, if you must know," said Crawford sharply, "she is dead this long while; and unless you wish to vex your poor Grandmamma beyond anything, you won't ask any more questions about her."

"Dead, aged ten!" said Elsie; "and she had two brothers, and all those story books! Oh dear! how sorry she must have been to leave them all. And I have been hoping she might come back for her books some day and play with me."

Elsie's head dropped down on to her arms as she finished speaking. It was but the hope of an afternoon; but it had taken a curiously strong hold on her.

The inscriptions and names on the blank leaves of the books had pleased her fancy first, and afterwards, as she turned over the well read pages, and discovered childish pencil drawings here and there, and comments on the stories, scrawled in a straggling hand on some of the margins, it almost seemed to her as if Alice Pamela herself had stepped out from behind the red dictionary, and was sitting by her side, pointing out the places where she

was to read, and imparting in confidence her private thoughts about the stories. . Elsie had a complete picture of her in her mind : ten years old, with father and mother, and brothers and cousins ; so bright, and rosy, and gay ; such an ardent lover of story books, and sharing Elsie's thoughts about them so exactly. She felt as if she had just found a friend, and could not bear to give her up.

"Did she die aged ten?" Elsie asked after a minute or two, lifting up her face quite wet with tears.

The strange thing was, that Crawford's face had changed while Elsie was hiding hers. She had thrown down the pile of curtains, and her eyelids were winking, and her lips twitching, in a fashion Elsie had never seen in them before.

"Miss Elsie," she said solemnly, "if I let you talk more than you ought, and your Aunt Margaret is displeased with me, you'll please to remember how you teased me beyond anything, and how determined you were."

"Yes, yes, I am determined, dear Crawford. Did she die when she was ten years old?"

"No, Miss Elsie, she lived to be grown up and married ; and I went away with her, and was her own maid. Miss Elsie, Miss Elsie, I will tell you the truth, whatever Miss Margaret may say to me. She was your own mamma."

"Alice Pamela Neale? Oh dear." The vision of the rosy faced, laughing reader of story books vanished from Elsie's mind, and left a blank there. She had no delightful visions of motherhood to fill it. Grandmamma had been quite enough for her in that relationship ; it was not maternal tenderness she was pining for. Crawford, who was rather fond of exciting emotions, and who had for years been fretting at the prohibition, which had withheld her from rousing in Elsie's mind the regrets which she thought were due to the young dead mother, was much disappointed at the blank in Elsie's face.

"You had a great miss of your dear mamma, Miss Elsie. You will never know all about it, that's one thing," she said disapprovingly.

"But she was a grown-up woman," said Elsie, "she would not have read story books ; a grown-up woman like Aunt Margaret."

"Not so much of a grown-up woman as she might have been, poor dear," Crawford answered ; then suddenly rising, she went to a closet at the farther end of the room, took a small square parcel from a high shelf, drew off a paper, and put a purple

case in Elsie's hands. "Just for once you shall look at her, Miss Elsie, just for once; and then I shall have done all I can for you, and you had better never tease me or ask me upsetting questions again, for there now, I've done talking."

Crawford touched a bright spot in the leather case as she finished her sentence. Up flew the lid, and from underneath, two bright saucy eyes, two smiling parted lips, a beaming, sparkling girl's face looked up at Elsie.

Elsie drew a long breath. "O Crawford! are mammas like that?" she said. "Alice Pamela Neale. Mamma! mamma!" she kept on repeating to herself, and all the time the sweet eyes laughed, and the golden curls hung softly round the bright face, as if some one had been playing with them a minute ago.

"O Crawford, how much nicer blue eyes are than black ones," Elsie said; "and little pointed noses than straight ones, like what every one has in this house. Oh, if every one could look like this, how happy we should all be!"

"Folk are as God made them," said Crawford. "And it's not always just the bonniest that's the happiest. You must give it me now, Miss Elsie; it's none of yours or mine, and I can't answer it to my conscience not to put it back directly."

Elsie resigned the case reluctantly, and followed it with her eyes, while Crawford folded it up, and restored it to its place in a corner of the top shelf of the closet.

It seemed very strange to her that it should have been there so many years, and that she should not have known about it. She should always know just exactly where it was now, and fancy it looking at her through the closet doors. No wonder Margaret shut it up. She felt sure Margaret would never like to look at such a pleasant, pretty thing. Elsie resolved that she would never speak to Margaret about Alice Pamela Neale; and then it came into her mind that there was one other question she must ask—one thing more she could not do without knowing—"Did Alice Pamela Neale—did mamma ever come here? Did she live in this house before she died, with Grandmamma and Aunt Margaret? I never remember there being any one else here than just ourselves."

Crawford was sewing brass rings on diligently by this time, and her usual impenetrable expression had returned to her face.

"I've done talking, Miss Elsie. Maybe I've said what had best have been let alone."

"Oh, but just this one thing. I do so want to know whether she ever saw me. You say she was *my* mamma."

"Well, of course she did, Miss Elsie; but you was but a little thing when—when—she was took from us. I don't suppose you can remember anything that happened before that."

"Oh, *how* I wish I could," Elsie said vehemently, and then she shut her eyes and tried to call up and arrange certain dim, fitful notions, that made a cloudy region at the very bottom of her mind, behind the point where conscious memory began.

A coherent recollection came back to her at last by dint of long looking into the dark. A scene rose distinctly before her eyes, which she knew had been part of her own life long ago, but the sweet face of the picture did not come into it. She only saw a large room; somehow or other very different in appearance from any room she had seen since; and herself a very small child sitting on a brightly flowered hearth-rug crying bitterly. She seemed to remember that she had been a long time alone in the room, and had wearied of all the beautiful toys scattered round her, and that there were noises in the house that had frightened her. The forlorn, injured feeling the little child had had came back quite strongly to her, and she could have cried again to think how wretched it had been. Then the door had opened and Grandmamma—yes, Elsie was sure it was no one else than just Grandmamma—had entered hurriedly, and snatched her up, and rocked her in her arms, and cried over her. Then everything had grown quite dark, Elsie thought, and she seemed to herself to have awakened a year or two afterwards in the little Oldbury house.

CHAPTER IV.

A FIRST VISIT.

Mr. and Mrs. Blake and Margaret returned home the next day, and the usual still routine of life began in the house; but one or two circumstances combined to keep alive in Elsie's mind the curiosity her conversation with Crawford had roused. Margaret was unwell for many weeks after their return, and could not walk out with her in the long spring afternoons. She had to take her exercise while following Grandmamma about the house and garden; and she came in the way of overhearing some scraps of conversation respecting Margaret's illness that gave her a great deal to think about.

She gathered that something unlooked-for had occurred to her grandmother and aunt while they were away. They had met some one they never expected to see again, and Margaret had been so much startled at the encounter that she had slipped down some steps they were mounting at the time and sprained her back.

It was very difficult to Elsie to picture her grandfather and grandmother and Margaret doing anything she was not accustomed to see them do every day, or moving about among people and in places of which she had never heard.

Most children have a background to their own experience, painted out for them by the stories their elders tell of their own doings; but Elsie had never listened to such stories, and was only just now beginning to be inquisitive about past events.

She used to bring her stool to the sofa, where Margaret was now obliged to recline for the greater part of the afternoon, and sit looking up into her face when her eyes were shut, wondering how she had looked long ago; whether she had been young

when Alice Pamela Neale was a child ; and whether she had ever read any of the story books that were hidden behind the dictionary.

When Margaret lay with closed eyes for long together, the temptation to cross-question her grew strong in Elsie's mind, but it always lessened with the first upward movement of the dark lashes from her cheek, and vanished altogether when she turned her gaze full on Elsie. Not that there was any severity in her eyes, but there was a weary, absent expression in them that thrust Elsie very far away—to a distance too great to speak from. Mrs. Blake would have been a more available confidant, but Elsie had a strong conviction it would not be wise to disturb the happy relationship between herself and Grandmamma, by beginning conversations on possibly agitating topics.

Grandmamma sometimes came out of her room, when she and Crawford had been closeted there together, with very swollen eyes, and a trembling about her lips that her little granddaughter did not like to see. She would speak quite cheerfully to Elsie at these times, and take her out into the garden to show her which of the lettuces she might cut for tea ; or to pronounce upon the condition of her crop of mustard and cress ; and Elsie, rejoicing in the cheerful words and pleasant looks, felt strongly that she had rather fill her own place towards Grandmamma than Crawford's.

Possibly, however, though no questions were asked, Mrs. Blake did discover something of what was passing in the child's mind ; for as the spring advanced she sent her out more frequently into the open air, and one evening made her almost wild with joy by telling her that she intended to take her on a shopping expedition into Oldbury next day, to purchase summer clothing for her use.

Mrs. Blake did not often walk as far down the hill as to that part of Oldbury where the principal shops lay. It had hitherto devolved on Margaret to transact all necessary business there.

She had never seemed to enjoy the task ; and Elsie thought it rather perverse of her, to spoil the edge of hers and Grandmamma's pleasure in their excursion, by looking anxiously after them when they came to the study to say good-bye. She even followed them to the front door to say gravely, though hesitatingly—

" You will take care, mother, you will not buy Elsie anything unsuitable."

"My dear," Mrs. Blake answered softly, "she is such a child; we must not make her remarkable, whatever our own feelings may be."

"No, not remarkable; but there is a suitability that one ought always to keep in view. I could not bear to see it violated."

"Well, well, she is a child," Grandmamma answered. "We cannot go very far wrong in what we get for her; but I will be careful, and not go against your wishes, my dear."

The sun was shining very brightly when they got out of doors, and the air was full of floating pink and white blossom leaves from the apple-trees in the gardens, and Elsie was too happy chasing them to trouble herself about her aunt's mysterious warning.

Her first speech was an exclamation of pleasure at espying Miss Berry, with her parish basket in her hand, nodding energetically at them from the opposite side of the street.

"She is crossing to speak to us, she is *so* pleased to see you and me out together; that is why her curls shake so far over the side of her bonnet. It is well they can't possibly fall off altogether. Is it not, Granny?"

Miss Berry had, apparently, less confidence in her head appendages than Elsie, for she paused to give them a steadying touch before she offered her hands, her basket, and her tract bundle to Mrs. Blake.

"Now you really must not ask me to turn back and walk with you," she said, "for I have so much in hand this morning. Yes, actually in hand, you see, though I did not mean to be so light-minded as to make a pun. Dear Mrs. Lutridge would have been quite shocked if she had heard me. She is always saying, 'What a snare my nimble tongue is to me!' Dear! I have turned round, I declare! Well, well, a little way, since dear Miss Elsie has seized my hand, and seems determined on having my company."

When the nature of their business in Oldbury was eagerly explained by Elsie, Miss Berry confessed that she should feel justified in putting other duties aside to help them with her advice; and once in the linendraper's shop, she showed a keen interest in their employment that roused long suppressed sympathies in Mrs. Blake's mind. Such a cordial, common-sense talk about dimities, and damasks, and pretty patterned jeans, she never thought to have enjoyed again.

Elsie's interest was almost worn out before Grandmamma

and Miss Berry began *seriously* to examine the little garments and hats produced for their inspection.

Mrs. Blake conscientiously confined her attention to the darkest and plainest; yet Elsie perceived she cast admiring glances towards the gayer coloured heap Miss Berry piled before her on the counter.

The apparent contrast in their taste struck Miss Berry at last.

"Now I do admire consistency," she began. "I am not as consistent myself as I could wish. To the last day of my life, I am afraid, I shall always go on wishing that pink and yellow were not such worldly colours; but if I had known you were such a decided Christian, I never would have asked to have that brightest pink muslin taken down from the shelf. I felt a little ashamed myself of pointing it out to the man. However, even Mrs. Lutridge's consistency does not go so far as to confine her strictly to striped blacks and browns. She calls the rose in her spring bonnet stone coloured; but between ourselves, my dear—I am sure I don't wish to be scandalous—but if I had seen it anywhere else I should have said it was yellow."

"It is yellow," said Elsie, decidedly. "An ugly yellow, like her own hair."

This speech brought on her an anxious, though good-humoured shake of the head from Miss Berry, while Mrs. Blake, who apparently did not see the connection between Mrs. Lutridge's bonnet and Elsie's summer dress, stooped down, lifted her on a high chair, and proceeded most reluctantly to fit the ugliest of the hats on her head.

Elsie indignantly wriggled her curls from under it, and Miss Berry seized the opportunity of substituting one trimmed with pink rosebuds on which, as she divined, Elsie had all along vehemently set her heart.

"I am sure I should be sorry to mislead any one," she said. "but I have heard that all the little Lutridges are to have silk dresses with lilac rosebuds on them for Sunday wear this summer. And after all, my dear, it is most natural for rosebuds to be pink, and for children, bless them, to wear them. Only do look how natural they look falling on her hair."

"Grandmamma," said Elsie vehemently, "do let me have the pink rosebud hat; all the other little girls in church have pretty hats—why should not I?"

"Why not, indeed?" cried Miss Berry, with a glance and a

nod at Mrs. Blake, which clearly implied that a pretty hat could not anywhere be better bestowed.

The appeal was made in all good-humour, and need not (Miss Berry thought afterwards) have moved Mrs. Blake so extremely as it did. Quick tears actually sprang to her eyes at the words—and in the shop, with all the shopmen looking at her. She threw her arms impulsively round Elsie, and said in a trembling voice—

“Why not? my bright haired, innocent darling, why should not you be as brave and gay as other children? What have you done that you should be left out?”

“To be sure—why, indeed?” reiterated Miss Berry, a little agitated and incoherent, between her wish to avoid a scene, and her anxiety not to omit improving an occasion that seemed to have a serious and emotional tendency. “To be sure, as we were saying, rosebuds and children—my memory is so bad, or else I have no doubt I might have thought of a text, or, at least, a verse from Watts’ Hymns, that would have sanctioned our putting them together. I am sure the number of toy sheep-folds, with appropriate texts outside, that Steenie Pierrepont had given him by the ladies of the congregation, till he got to hate the very sight of a lamb! Only one does not see how that applies, except that rosebuds and lambs are both young things. However, I can look out for a text in the Concordance when I get home; and meanwhile, as I see you have made up your mind, I will tell the man to send this hat, and the pink muslin with the innocent white sprig, that goes so well with it, up to your house.”

Elsie left the shop radiant with delight at seeing such unexpected splendours of attire put aside for her wearing. But no sooner was the excitement of the contest over than Miss Berry’s scrupulous conscience began to trouble her, lest she should have erred in her encouragement of youthful vanity. As she walked down the street, she searched her memory anxiously for some antidote in the way of depressing hymns or texts, that she might hasten to administer.

“If I had but dear Mrs. Lutridge’s memory,” she began. “I assure you now, she will hardly ever speak to a poor child without bringing in one or other of Watts’ beautiful verses, which may stick to the memory, you know, and do such incalculable good; whereas I—though I know there is a sweet little poem of his about ‘silk attire’ and the ‘poor worm,’ and ‘I a wretched child,’ which would have been so exceedingly appro-

priate to dear little Miss Elsie just now—cannot bring the words rightly to my mind. ‘Rob the poor worm!’ such a touching way of putting it! and so often as I have heard that hymn repeated.”

“However, here we are at the door of my little house, and dear Elsie is dragging back a little. The hill is steep for little feet to climb. Dear Mrs. Blake, I don’t venture to ask you to come in, and partake of my early dinner; to tell the truth, it consists to-day of sausages and mashed potatoes and rolled jam pudding; for Steenie Pierrepont is to dine with me, and that is the dinner he likes best within my means to provide. I don’t venture to ask you, but Miss Elsie might not dislike—the sausages are home-made, and remarkably wholesome, and after dinner I could look out that poem about the worms, and read it to her, which would be such a satisfaction. My memory is against me; but dear Mrs. Lutridge sometimes does me the favour to look in and speak a seasonable word, as she knows so well how to do; and there is my great map of Palestine against the wall, to give the conversation a Scriptural turn, and sometimes I really do hope that the afternoons the dear children spend with me are not so very unprofitable.”

“Oh, Grandinamma,” gasped Elsie, for Mrs. Blake stood on the door-step with a hesitating expression on her face, which induced Miss Berry to ramble on, and wound Elsie up to an agony of anxiety. Miss Berry’s proposition was like the sudden opening of heaven to her; and she thought, in her childish, passionate little heart, that she should die on the spot of sorrow, if it were not accepted.

“You see she has led such a secluded life, she has never made acquaintance with other children, she would be shy,” Mrs. Blake said.

“Grandmamma, I should not,” Elsie broke in vehemently. “Let me, O Grandmamma, Grandmamma!” Elsie threw her arms round Mrs. Blake, and lifted up a face that actually trembled and quivered with the vehemence of her entreaty.

Grandmamma stooped and kissed her forehead softly. “Well, darling,” she said, “if you wish it so much, I will take the responsibility on myself. It is the first time I have let you go anywhere alone; but I hope no harm will come of it, and that you will be happy.”

Only the first and the last words reached Elsie’s ears, and interpreting them into consent, she prevented any more, by dragging down Grandmamma’s face for a kiss of gratitude.

She was extremely happy and triumphant, till Mrs. Blake had left her standing on the door-step alone with her friend ; and then, while Miss Berry fumbled for her latch-key, and opened her door, she watched Grandmamma's figure lessening as she toiled up the steep street, and felt her heart, that had been beating so wildly, suddenly compressed with a chill sense of desertion and loneliness, which half disposed her to take sudden flight, and never pause till she was clinging to Grandmamma's skirts again. If Steenie Pierrepont should refuse to speak to her, or make a face of derision at her, as she had once seen him do to another boy in the street !

No discoverer on the verge of gaining the result of long years of labour ever felt more agitated than Elsie did, while Miss Berry was preparing to open the door of her house, which seemed to her the entrance into an utterly unknown world. It was, indeed, absolutely the first house, except her own abode, and the house of God, open to all, which, within her memory, little Elsie had ever entered.

CHAPTER V.

OLDBURY TACTICS.

THERE were few people in Oldbury, whether old or young, who would have felt curiosity at the prospect of entering Miss Berry's little house, though, to say the truth, its interior was as little conformable to the established Oldbury type as an abode that came under Mrs. Luttridge's censorship could well manage to be. Everybody was used to the oddities of the place, and had left off remarking upon them. Every little child in the neighbourhood had stood upon a chair to twist round the great ostrich egg that hung in the window instead of a flower-basket. Every schoolboy had admired and coveted the curious pieces of mechanism, in the shape of miniature water-mills and sand-clocks, which had been left in Miss Berry's charge by an ingenious brother, who had quitted Oldbury to make his fortune forty years ago, and never came back again. Every little girl had been delighted with the bead baskets and dancing cork-dolls on which Miss Berry had exercised her ingenuity, in what she called her dark days ; and all the Sunday-school children in the place had been edified by pondering over a pictorial chart of Scripture history, that filled an entire side of the little sitting-room, and to the designing of which Miss Berry had devoted her artistic powers since the sinfulness of an existence given up to bead baskets had come home to her.

She regarded this map as the great work of her life ; and she used to say that she could never be thankful enough to Mr. Pierrepont for the descriptions of Palestine in the first sermons he had preached at Oldbury, which had set her upon the task.

The drawing of the very original little pictures which now covered every inch of the wall had interested her, more than the

fashioning of bead baskets had ever done, and then the possession of such an educational treasure gave her an excuse for inviting the neighbours' children to her house oftener, and giving them more frequent slices of cake and new sixpences, as stimulants to memory, than Mrs. Lutridge would have considered justifiable under other circumstances. The neighbours, who had watched her exits and entrances for the last forty years, would have said that it was impossible to imagine a more monotonous existence than hers; yet it seemed to herself that she had pasted and painted a great many crises of her life in among the little pictures; and when sometimes, in the twilight, she allowed herself to sit idle and contemplate her great work, as artists love to do, it was not always the events the drawings were meant to represent that came before her mind as she gazed.

"Ah!" she would say, "it was while I was putting those many colours into Joseph's coat that I got the letter to say my poor brother William was dead. I was in the desert when I heard about that failure of the Bristol Bank which lost Arabella and me nearly all our fortunes. I was drawing that oak at Mamre—it has got a great blot upon it now—when Mrs. Lutridge came in to say that Mr. Pierrepont was actually going to be married, and *not* to an Oldbury lady. I had just begun the bordering, when Mrs. Pierrepont called the first time, and stayed so long, and admired my drawing in such a friendly way; and I had only got round the corner when I heard that Steenie was born, and she was dying. Ah, dear! what a lesson that the brightest lots are unstable! How dreadful it would have been, to be sure, if any one in Oldbury had ever envied her. I wonder whether some of us were quite as friendly to her—pretty, gay, little thing—as we might have been. To be sure, it was a surprise, when we had made up our minds to some one so different, to have a stranger come among us after all!"

"After all" did not in Miss Berry's inmost thoughts mean an accusation of flirtation with any Oldbury lady against Mr. Pierrepont. His arrival, in the past time, had no doubt been a great event to many of the female inhabitants of Oldbury.

He came into the midst of a very stagnant spiritual and intellectual life, a young, eloquent preacher, who, if he had not at that time gone through any very deep spiritual experiences himself, had been brought up under a much more exciting and emotional system of religious teaching than had been given to Oldbury before his coming.

The phrases he used, and the doctrines on which he especially insisted, did not perhaps mean as much to him as they had done to the teachers who had first given them prominence, but he was sincere in his advocacy as far as it went. His hearers had more spiritual conceptions of duty, and higher aims in life, presented to them than they had ever known before; and if the scruples he suggested about matters of dress and social amusement were somewhat trivial and exaggerated, it was the prominence given them by his female admirers, and their elevation into badges of party feeling, that did the real harm. Oldbury was not a place where a change, wise or foolish, in social practices would be carried out without an immense dust of contest and heat of party spirit being raised and blown about it.

Miss Berry took her side—what the Oldbury ladies called “the serious side”—after the very first sermon. It was a real epoch to her—the beginning of a higher, or at all events a more active and conscious, spiritual life. But having taken her side at once, she was too humble and kindly to form harsh judgments of those who held back, as some of her friends were disposed to do.

It was pure benevolence, untinged with any love of victory, that made her rejoice ecstatically when, about a year after Mr. Pierrepont's advent, it was whispered about among his adherents that Mrs. Lutridge, the rich banker's wife, hitherto the leader of all the gaieties in Oldbury, had resolved to give no more card-parties, and had actually taken the ostrich feather out of her winter bonnet. She never thought of claiming any superiority over her friend for having been beforehand with her in choosing the right way, and she very soon allowed herself to fall as completely under Mrs. Lutridge's guidance in spiritual as she had formerly done in worldly concerns.

Even when Mrs. Lutridge's new zeal and devotion eclipsed, that of all Mr. Pierrepont's earlier friends, she could still go smiling about, and shame the other serious ladies out of their latent jealousy by her congratulations on the benefits that must accrue to the whole town, now that two such superior people as dearest Mrs. Lutridge and excellent Mr. Pierrepont had found each other out, and were willing to take the direction of everybody's concerns into their own hands.

The remaining ladies of the worldly party retired from the contest when they found themselves deserted so conspicuously by their leader; and though the few gentlemen of Oldbury were rather less amenable, and stuck to some of their old

fashioned amusements after Mrs. Lutridge had definitely declared against them, they were too small a minority, and just then of too little account in Oldbury, to form any serious obstacle to the general harmony.

It only served to make Mrs. Lutridge more interesting, and to rally the hearts of her female friends round her, when it was known that Mr. Lutridge, hitherto the Oldbury ideal of a well conducted family man, had insisted on giving one of his odious dinner-parties on a Thursday lecture night: and there was but one united sentiment of triumph and congratulation telegraphed from bench to bench on the evening when the final victory was won, and Mr. Lutridge was observed following his wife into the lecture room, with that touch of added stateliness in his bearing, which Oldbury understood to signify that he had found it advisable to succumb in a domestic contest, and wished to warn outsiders against presuming on his defeat.

The halcyon days of peace and universal good-will that followed Mr. Lutridge's capitulation were too perfect to last for ever; but the storm that ended them burst from a quite unexpected quarter.

Of course everybody knew that Mr. Pierrepont must marry some time, and it cannot be denied that this certainty was hardly ever mentioned in Oldbury society without causing a good many hearts to flutter. Miss Berry congratulated herself that she had passed the age for "all that sort of thing," as she phrased it, and could listen to the confidences of her female friends without any trouble on her own account. "Though, to be sure," as she sometimes said, "very extraordinary things did happen to people at all times of their lives, and one never knew when one was quite safe." Even to her the uncertainty of conjecture was harassing enough to make it quite a relief when the advent of a sister of dear Mrs. Lutridge, on a long visit to Oldbury, pointed Mr. Pierrepont's way to a wife so clearly, that it was hardly worth while to waste another conjecture on the subject. There was a rumour in Oldbury afterwards, that Mr. Lutridge had once said to a confidant in the privacy of his sitting-room at the bank, that he believed it was the coming of Mrs. Lutridge's sister to Oldbury that frightened Mr. Pierrepont into matrimony. Only a few people had courage to believe that such a speech had been made with impunity; yet the facts remained. During the summer of Mrs. Lutridge's sister's residence at Laurel House, Mr. Pierrepont was observed to make frequent short absences from Oldbury, and on his

return from one of these, about harvest time, it was noticed that, instead of walking up the hill, as usual, to call on Mrs. Lutridge, he paid a visit to Mr. Lutridge at the bank, and on going away was followed to the door by that gentleman, and shaken very warmly by the hand on the door-step in sight of several Oldbury passers-by.

Before evening the thunder-clap had fallen. Every man, woman, and child in Oldbury knew that in three weeks' time a Mrs. Pierrepont was coming to Oldbury—a perfect stranger to the place, of whose very existence no one, not even Mrs. Lutridge, had ever heard before that day. Putting all personal considerations aside, Oldbury could not feel that it had been treated with proper confidence; nor could the ladies of the place regard that hearty shake of the hand, bestowed by Mr. Lutridge on the culprit, as other than a melancholy display of mean spirited triumph over their discomfiture.

Somehow or other all the gentlemen of Oldbury seemed to grow an inch or two taller, and to feel warranted in taking more upon themselves after Mr. Pierrepont's marriage was declared. Before the evening was over there was hardly one who had not vexed the soul of wife or sister by declaring that he had known all along how it would be. Talk of men being more magnanimous than women, and less disposed to recur to vexatious topics! The Oldbury tea-tables could have borne signal testimony to the contrary at that period; but then, to be sure, the unclerical masculine portion of the community had had to put up with a long course of disregard, and might be expected to take so signal an opportunity of re-asserting itself.

Miss Berry being so fortunate as to have neither husband, brother, nor lover to work on her feelings, recovered the shock of the first surprise more quickly than other people; and though she was unable to keep her congratulations free from embarrassing allusions to past possibilities, she could express her good-will with a fervour that was actually grateful to Mr. Pierrepont amid the general coldness.

"It was no doubt dreadful to think of any of dear Mrs. Lutridge's plans falling to the ground," she observed; "but, to be sure, what was she thinking of—there never had been any plan; and if there seemed to be any little backwardness or shyness on the part of certain people—the idea of a stranger coming among them,—dear Mr. Pierrepont would understand—quite accounted,—and it was said, used to a different way of life; the daughter of a lady of rank; of a Lady Selina Deane!

To be sure, how it sounded ! Not enough perhaps to embarrass Mrs. Lutridge, who had been used to the best society, and was not to be surpassed for elegance—but humbler people—however, if gratitude and good-will counted for anything in a simple way, Miss Berry could answer for there being a large store awaiting the young bride in Oldbury."

All down the steep street of the little town, from the top of the hill, where he had passed Mrs. Lutridge's house without calling, to the door of Miss Berry's abode, Mr. Pierrepont walked in the golden light of the last October afternoon he spent in Oldbury before his marriage, listening to this incoherent chatter, and to a great deal more like it, with a smile of genuine pleasure on his handsome face. And when they shook hands on the door-step, and he replied with fervent thanks to her timid "God bless and prosper you," there was actually a sudden upspringing of moisture to his eyes. He was a very fervent, impressionable, sympathetic tempered man, wearing his heart on his sleeve more openly than is convenient in our chill English climate, and having in his character a certain necessity for living in the warm sunshine of universal good-will and applause, which made his position in Oldbury a somewhat perilous one.

He had been a good deal pained by the cold turning away of so many friendly faces ; pained, and puzzled, and rendered anxious about the future success of his ministrations among his people ; doubtful even concerning the wisdom of his choice—which was, he admitted to himself, a little inconsistent with former professions. Even Miss Berry's timid support and fluttering good-will was welcome, and came like a ray of sunshine that day.

She, on her side, thought she should be grateful all her life for the way in which he had received her poor words. She would never, she promised herself, care again for the little necessary slights, which in other moods it was so natural he should put upon her.

It takes very little to bind some hearts for ever—hearts that have been very much starved of love and kindness. A little crumb of consideration, a faint show of good-will, will buy all their long accumulated stores of devotion cheaply enough.

From that day forth Miss Berry's championship, such as it was, was secured to the little bride, who soon after came to Oldbury.

Almost everybody else had a great deal to say against her ;

and it cannot be denied that, as Mr. Pierrepont's chosen wife, she was a puzzling apparition to the "serious" ladies of Oldbury. She wore a longer and better curled ostrich feather in her hat than the one Mrs. Lutridge had laid aside. Her pretty little head was decked out of an evening with all manner of fluttering knots of ribbon, and elaborate braids of hair. She did not scruple to say that her favourite head-dress had come from Paris, and to offer the pattern of it to Mrs. Lutridge's sister. She made the direst confusion in the tract cupboard, and mixed the tracts for the converted and the unconverted with hopeless want of discrimination. She gossiped with the cottagers instead of scolding them, and she played with the little children at the infant school, and curled their hair, when she ought to have been teaching them their Watts' Catechism.

She was enough to cause a whole army of professors to backslide, Mrs. Lutridge said, more especially as Mr. Pierrepont seemed strangely blind to her shortcomings, and might be seen smiling down into her face with the utmost complacency, while she clung to his arm, and laughed and chatted to him up to the very threshold of the vestry door of a Sunday morning. Mrs. Lutridge considered that he could not walk with pitch and not be defiled, and began to discover a lamentable falling off in the fervour and fulness of doctrine of the Sunday sermons. They no longer edified her, and she lamented having to spend so many of the precious Sabbath hours in listening to them.

Some scruples about the lawfulness of using a form of prayer suggested themselves to her mind, after Lady Selina Deane came to Oldbury, and twice passed her in the street without bowing; and if the preacher at the only Dissenting chapel in the town had not also been the principal grocer of the place, whose weekly bills Mrs. Lutridge was always disputing, her allegiance to the Church of England (such as it was) might have been undermined at that period of her life.

It was in the autumn of the year succeeding the marriage that Lady Selina Deane turned Oldbury upside down, by bringing her carriage, and horses, and livery servants to the Rectory, and dashing about the streets quite furiously, as if she (or at any rate her coachman) thought that people were ever in a hurry, or could have anything particular to do in Oldbury. Parties ran very high after Lady Selina came, and there seemed to be a danger of the old distinction of serious

and worldly being forgotten, in a new division of the parishioners into partisans and non-partisans of the parsonage ladies.

Miss Berry humbly hoped it was not because Lady Selina kept her carriage standing at her door an hour at a time, while she admired the map, that she could not help discerning some very valuable qualities in that lady. And Mrs. Lutridge was quite sure that her decided opinion as to Lady Selina's frivolity and worldliness had nothing whatever to do with her having had the unaccountable stupidity and insolence to stop her in the street one day, and give her a message to herself, under the impression that she was her own parlour-maid. Mrs. Lutridge was so eloquent one day at a tract meeting on the sinfulness of paying homage to worldly rank and distinction, in preference to spiritual gifts, that Miss Berry shed tears of remorse at her own supposed inconsistency, and had to go to bed with a headache as soon as she got home.

It was a pity; for, as it turned out, that was an evening when tears might well have been spared in Oldbury, so many had to be shed in the days that followed.

In the midst of all this excitement, when the quarrel was at its height, a sudden lush came. People spoke the names of Lady Selina and Mrs. Pierrepont low when they met in the streets. The knocker at the Rectory was tied up, and the Doctor's face looked grave as he left the house. Things were not going on so favourably there as could be wished, people said mysteriously to each other as they stood round the church door after service on the next Sunday, and commented on the effort it had cost poor Mr. Pierrepont to get through the sermon. A fine healthy son was born at the Rectory, whom Oldbury adopted as an object of interest at once; but the fair little mother—several people's hearts smote them as they named her; and not a few resolutions, almost vows, were registered under the Sunday autumn sunshine, by her late critics, that they would not notice so very exactly how near she was to the church door when she laughed up into her husband's face, or how trippingly her feet danced down the aisle, if only she would come and repeat those offences among them again.

In the evening a stranger performed the service; but he might as well have preached from the top of Snowdon for anything the Oldbury people heard of his discourse.

It had been whispered by the pew-openers and beadles, as the congregation went into church, and everybody knew it,—she was dead. She would never scandalize any one in Oldbury any

more ; the pretty little thing ; the gay little thing ; people had fancied they had not liked her, but she had managed to fill up a great space in their thoughts, and now it was just as if a bright beam of sunshine had faded suddenly, leaving them all very conscious of the blank darkness.

There was nothing to be heard but tears and sobs in the church as long as the service lasted ; and Mrs. Lutridge had to keep her face buried in her handkerchief the whole time. She wished, perhaps, that she had not held her lips so rigidly drawn down that *last* time when Lady Selina's carriage passed her in the road, and Mrs. Pierrepont looked out and nodded with such a coaxing, bright little smile. Yet, by dint of dwelling a great deal on the extent of her own sorrow, she contrived to persuade herself, before her tears were all shed, that she and that dear childish little Mrs. Pierrepont had been very good friends on the whole, and had understood and appreciated each other at bottom after all.

She made up her mind that she would forget any little uncomfortableness there had ever been ; and, at all events, no one should prevent her doing her duty to the child. She was firmly resolved on that. No slights from Lady Selina should induce her to deprive the motherless babe at the Rectory of the advantages of her constant supervision. If, by and bye, anything of his poor mother's lightness of disposition should betray itself, it might be well for him that there should be some one at hand with firmness to repress the incipient fault in time. To be sure, things were wonderfully ordered ; it might be a great blessing to that poor little Pierrepont to be guided from the first by firmer hands than would have been over him if his dear mother had lived.

Mrs. Lutridge's sobs grew less distressing as she followed out her thoughts ; and though her eyes were red and swollen with weeping when the final blessing was pronounced, and she raised her head from her handkerchief, yet she was able to talk with considerable eloquence on the wisdom of the inscrutable decrees during her walk home ; and she rather startled Mr. Lutridge by the sharpness with which she reproved him for characterizing the late event as a "*mysterious Providence*."

Lady Selina Deane did not dispute the possession of her grandchild with Oldbury and Mrs. Lutridge, as some people feared she might. She was in a great hurry to get away when the melancholy event was over, and professed herself too much overcome with grief for her daughter's death to have any atten-

tion to spare for the "unhappy child," as, to Miss Berry's indignation, she persisted in calling the baby.

She even went so far as to say something to Mrs. Lutridge when she called on the day of the funeral, which that lady interpreted into a formal making over of all responsibility concerning her grandson to her. A very few days afterwards the handsome bay horses and smart chariot, that had attracted so much attention, were seen for the last time in Oldbury streets; and people began to look back on the time when they were always dashing about everywhere as a past brilliant era, such as Oldbury must never expect to know again.

There was only the baby at the Rectory, and a something in Mr. Pierrepont's face, as he stood up in his pulpit on Sundays, and moved about on his week-day ministrations, to prevent everything being precisely as it had been a year before.

The breach (to give it a more serious name than it had perhaps deserved) was quite healed between the pastor and his people.

Mrs. Lutridge took longer notes than ever of the Sunday sermons; and when Mrs. Lutridge recurred to some of the difficulties respecting the doctrines of the Established Church she had once professed to be troubled with, it cost her a flood of tears to discover that her husband was capable of misunderstanding her state of mind so entirely.

When Mr. Pierrepont recovered from the first stunning effect of his great domestic trial, it was some comfort to him to find shed around him the same sunshine of admiring good-will and confidence that had made the first years of his ministrations in Oldbury pass so pleasantly.

He felt positively grateful to Mrs. Lutridge for forgetting her late grievances, and showing herself willing to resume her old dictatorship in school and charity club affairs. He was in no mood of mind to resent the usurpation of authority which his pre-occupation tempted her to achieve. He was passing through a crisis of great mental struggle, and the daily routine of outward existence slipped past him like the events of a dream.

In common with many people who have been accustomed to look at religion chiefly from the emotional and subjective side, and who have adopted the phraseology of highly spiritual doctrine, without having individually experienced its power, his first real sorrow came in the character of a great shaker and disturber of old beliefs.

The heavenly lights which he had always supposed to be there, beyond the flood of earthly sunshine in which he was walking, refused to show themselves distinctly, now that his sun had gone down in sudden night, and his soul was, for a time, wrapped in a cloud of thick darkness.

It was often torture to him to have to get up and preach of comfort, and assured hopes, which he could not feel, the more especially as he had been accustomed to teach that the very existence of these hopes for each individual depended on his power of appropriating them.

It would have been well for the future integrity of his character and firmness of his faith, if he had had courage to give up his duties for a time, confess his inefficiency as a teacher, and go away to battle out his difficulties to an honest issue; but such a course of conduct did not lie within the scope of his nature. He could not break up old ties; he could not come down from the height on which he stood, and disappoint and bewilder those who were looking up to him as the awakener of their spiritual life, by confessing that he had taught what he did not experimentally know. It would have been death to him to attempt this. He did what he could; he struggled, and worked, and thrust away thoughts that looked like temptations to him, and gradually a calmer state of mind came back, and a certain measure of light. But his character suffered, his sympathies were narrowed by what he went through instead of widened, as they might have been, had he been able to meet his trial in an honest way.

Meanwhile the baby at the Rectory struggled through infancy to childhood, not filling up any great space in his father's thoughts. He had so many self-appointed guardians that Mr. Pierrepont might be excused for feeling himself absolved from bestowing much personal care upon him. Little Steenie Pierrepont was the child of the whole town, and every lady in it considered herself more or less responsible for his well-doing.

From three years old to six, he paid more visits than any other inhabitant of Oldbury. The devout single ladies coveted his company almost as much as that of his father, and would give up a Thursday evening lecture to entertain him at tea.

It was much talked of among them, that he early showed a delight in arranging their drawing-room chairs into pews, and in delivering harangues from supposititious pulpits. Miss Berry took the trouble to write down some of his childish discourses, and found so many well known phrases strung together with a

certain coherence, that she could not but regard them as delightful evidences of early enlightenment.

Mrs. Lutridge was beginning to consider that such very precocious spiritual development might probably be the precursor of an early death, and that she might as well be collecting materials for a future memoir, when some lady, a little more discerning than the rest, pointed out that the child was amusing himself during the whole exhibition by mimicking his father's voice and gestures with extraordinary skill.

Mrs. Lutridge could not believe in such depravity in one so young, till one day it came into Steenie's head, at her house, to diversify his entertainment by acting the members of the congregation listening to the sermon, and she caught sight of certain emphatic gestures made by the curly head, and a swelling importance assumed by the childish figure that, somehow or other, brought a very uncomfortable flush of self-consciousness into her face. She gave up all thought of the memoir from that day forth; had more confidence in the stability of Steenie's health than heretofore; and instead of regarding him in the light of a possible "folded lamb," or "gathered flower," gave way at times to most melancholy prognostications respecting his future career, and the heart-aches he would occasion his father.

Poor Mr. Pierrepont, who had been accustomed to nothing but the most rapturous congratulations on his young son's dispositions, was a good deal puzzled by the sudden change. He showed a paternal disinclination to see his little son's faults in the worst light, which rather scandalized Mrs. Lutridge; but he put a stop to Steenie's promiscuous visitings in the town, and began to try to have the child more with him than formerly. Seated on a little chair in the study, with his spelling book or his Latin grammar in his hand, Steenie had opportunities of studying his father on week-days as well as in the pulpit. He did study him a great deal, and read more in his face than he did in the book. He got to know exactly what he thought of the different visitors who came in, how glad he was when some of them went away, and what twinges of disgust he sometimes endured while making the usual civil replies to their criticisms of his sermons.

It was a curious sort of companionship between the two, with so much more of comprehension and sympathy on the side of the younger than the elder.

Mr. Pierrepont was puzzled sometimes at the considering

look in the bright young eyes that he often surprised watching him from the stool in the corner; and he would lay down his pen in the middle of a sentence and call Steenie to him, and put his hand softly on his curly head and ask him some babyish question, such as he thought suitable to his understanding. The boy's heart grew hot, with a strange mixture of love and indignation and pain on these occasions. He would have given anything in the world to be able to say something to convince his father that he was not so foolish as he seemed to suppose; but he only looked sulky and injured, and muttered his answer so unintelligibly that Mr. Pierrepont gave up the attempt at conversation in despair, and wished, with a sigh, as Steenie retreated to his stool, and began to count the marbles in his pocket again, that he had better spirits, or that there were any study in the world which could teach him to make himself agreeable to his son.

Times improved for Steenie when he was old enough to attend the Grammar School of the town as a day scholar. He was quick enough to have no difficulties with his lessons, and soon climbed over the heads of elder scholars, while his gay humour made him popular in the playground. If the busy-bodies of Oldbury had but let him alone, and had not thought it their duty to report every boyish misdemeanour of which he was guilty to his father, he would have been quite happy. As it was, his temper was kept in a constant state of irritation by the knowledge that his incomings and outgoings were spied upon; and his affection for his father was weakened by the continual collisions of wills that other people's interference brought about.

Mr. Pierrepont could not divest himself of the notion which the Oldbury ladies were always impressing upon him, that somehow or other his son was bound to set an example of especially correct demeanour to the other youths of the town; and Steenie rebelled sturdily against the idea of being looked at in the light of a walking sermon.

He would have restrained his mischievous propensities for the single purpose of pleasing his father, for whose affection he often vehemently longed; but he looked on the extra strictness imposed on him as a weak yielding to Mrs. Lutridge's influence on his father's part, and felt as if he were asserting the independence of the family by kicking against it.

But all this time Miss Berry has been putting her latch-key

into her door, and there, just as the door flies open, Steenie Pierrepont comes running up the street from the school-house, with his satchel over his shoulder, and an unmistakeable grin of pleasure on his face.

The only house in Oldbury that he liked visiting now was Miss Berry's, and he had made up his mind to spend a jolly afternoon, in turning over her brother's old mechanical toys, and reading some volumes of old fashioned fairy tales, that, by dint of much coaxing, he had persuaded her to take down from her uppermost book-shelf.

CHAPTER VI.

STEENIE.

ELSIE was disconcerted to perceive that the broad smile disappeared from Steenie's pleasant face when his eyes fell on her.

"Oh, you have some one with you," he said, in a dismayed voice; then, brightening up as he scanned Elsie from head to foot, "but never mind, it's not one of the little Lutridges."

"My dear Steenie," said Miss Berry, "I do wish—that tongue of yours—if it had been one of the dear little Lutridges, I know quite well you would have been—but it is only Elsie Blake, who is so good as to come and dine with us."

They were in the tiny vestibule of the little house by this time; and to Elsie's surprise (he had seemed such a formidable rough schoolboy a minute before) Steenie threw his arms round Miss Berry's neck and bestowed a hearty hug upon her. Then, as an after-thought, he gave an experimental twitch to the curls, that had been blown by the spring wind a little too far over her forehead.

"Now, Steenie, dear," said Miss Berry in an expostulatory tone, "I have confided to you frankly that it *is* a front, and gone the length of showing you exactly how I fasten it on, so you need not look so curiously at it every time."

"It is such an odd concern, and you are such a delightful old Berry. I like you up to your front better than all the other sour Oldbury people put together—you know I do."

"But, my dear, when there are others so much more worthy—though certainly I can venture to say that I have felt like a mother to you ever since you were born."

"No, not like that," said Steenie, throwing back his head, and considering her gravely. "My mother would not have

looked like you. She would never have worn a front if she had lived to be ever so old."

"My dear, of course I did not mean that I was like your mother, only my feeling. She was, oh! so different from me, I have told you often."

"Yes," said Steenie, proudly; "the prettiest, nicest, happiest looking person that ever came to Oldbury,—that's what you say she was."

"You are a fortunate boy to have had such a mother; and then your father, such a good man!"

"Oh, I know all about that," said Steenie abruptly. "Let's go into the dining-room and look at the map. Have you put in that strong man killing a lion in a pit on a snowy day that I found out for you?"

"Yes, here he is," said Miss Berry, opening her sitting-room door. "I have been obliged to screw him up into a corner, and make the lion more like a puppy dog than I could have wished artistically, for I am getting short of space. You can explain some of the pictures to little Miss Blake, while I take off my bonnet and help Caroline to bring the dinner."

The two children looked at each other shyly, without speaking, for some minutes after they were left alone.

"I say," said Steenie at last, "you ain't any relation to Mrs. Lutridge, are you?"

"No, no," cried Elsie emphatically.

"Then come along," said Steenie.

Elsie was rather puzzled to know what "come along" meant, as they neither of them went anywhere; but she concluded that it was equivalent to saying "Let us be friends," and she allowed herself to feel all the ecstatic happiness that such a proposition was calculated to give her.

When Miss Berry, following her small maid-servant with the dinner-tray, re-entered the room, she found the two children kneeling close together in a corner, and laughing heartily over some grotesque faces Steenie was surreptitiously introducing among the scroll-work bordering of the map.

Their mingled joyful voices, filling the shabby dark little room, gave her the keenest pleasure, as if a flood of sunshine, and delicious flower scents, and purest air had come round her; and though she suspected danger to her greatest treasure, she could not bring herself to inquire what they were doing.

Elsie was in paradise too. She could hardly believe her eyes as they followed the motions of Steenie's fingers.

There, with down-drawn lips and up-turned eyes, Mrs. Lutridge's face looked out from a rose—the leaf near it turned, by magic, into the man who kept the turnpike on the Bath Road ; and positively, there, walking down that great coil of flourishes as if it were a road, her own figure and Aunt Margaret's grew up under the pencil. Their poke bonnets, their straight dresses, the very way she hung back staring round her, and Aunt Margaret looked straight on.

"Oh, how clever you are ! What a wonderful boy you are !" she sighed admiringly ! "How I wish the pencil would do like that with me !"

"Why should not it ?" asked Steenie condescendingly. "Some girls draw—my cousin Cecil Russel does. I've lots of little pictures she has sent me in letters. I'll show them to you some day."

"You have a cousin !" said Elsie, with admiration and envy increasing at every word. "How nice to have a cousin ; and what a nice name Cecil is !"

"Yes," said Steenie hesitatingly ; "but I'll tell you something. She has not half such a nice face as you have. I've often thought of that when I've looked at you in church. Cecil's jolly enough, but you, somehow or other, you are altogether different."

"Am I ? Oh dear, I don't want to be different," said Elsie, her little face lengthening. "Don't say I am so very different."

"You are, however," said Steenie stoutly. "But you have a great deal the nicest face."

Elsie was doubtful whether or not the second part of the sentence atoned for the first ; but Miss Berry called them to take their seats, and the conversation could not be pursued further.

"Oh, I say," observed Steenie when the covers were taken off the potatoes and sausage-rolls, and a perspective of pudding and dessert on the sideboard presented itself before him—"I say, I met Mrs. Lutridge as I was coming out of school. She saw me turn in here, and she's sure to call just now, to see what you are giving me for dinner ; so if there is anything you don't want her to see, you'd better put it away at once."

"Anything I don't want her to see, Steenie, dear ! You do fluster me dreadfully by putting things in such a coarse way. Anything I don't want dear Mrs. Lutridge to see——. To be sure, almonds and raisins for dessert, and preserved ginger are luxuries more suited to Mrs. Lutridge's position than to the state into which it has pleased—— ; but why you should think

me capable of hiding—and oh, my dear Steenie ! I cannot see clearly through the blind, but is not that her bonnet coming up the steps ?”

“ Yes, it is ; and you left the door on the latch, so she will be in upon us in an instant, the prying old——”

“ Friend,” interposed Miss Berry quickly ; “ and most unthankful should we be for all her efforts after our good, if we did not make her welcome at all hours. To be sure, the preserved ginger—it was very inconsiderate in me—that large fly is getting into the syrup ; and the closet would certainly be a safer place.”

“ No, no, it is too late now ; you had better sit still, she will catch you with it in your hand,” said Steenie, laughing. “ After all, she can’t do anything but jaw. Give us something to be eating while she goes on at it.”

Miss Berry’s hands were shaking too much to enable her to fill the plates quickly, and before any one was served the door flew open, and Mrs. Lutridge, followed by her usual train of pale faced daughters, sailed into the room.

A good deal of commotion followed. The six little girls had all to be kissed by Miss Berry, and accommodated with seats, and meanwhile the dinner grew cold, and Mrs. Lutridge stood upright in the middle of the room, and acquainted herself, to the minutest particular, with the condition of everything in it ; from the preserved ginger on the sideboard, and the vacant space in the book-shelf, whence Steenie had abstracted the fairy tale book, to Elsie’s worn winter dress and shabby black sash.

Elsie, who trembled all over under the sharp look that finally rested on her, was made the subject of the first observation.

“ So you have invited the little Blake child to dine with Steenie Pierrepont,” Mrs. Lutridge said, with raised eyebrows directed towards Miss Berry.

Miss Berry could bear a great deal, but an attempt to limit her hospitality was the one offence that roused her to something like self-assertion.

“ Yes,” she said, with a certain dignity, as she drew Elsie a little forward. “ Dear little Elsie Blake, her good grandmamma has been kind enough to trust me with her for this afternoon. I have not much to offer in the way of entertainment, but I do my best, and the dear children all seem glad to come to me.”

“ That we are,” cried Steenie defiantly ; “ a great deal better pleased, I can tell you, than when we have to go to some other places.”

His face had grown quite red and eager ; his curls seemed to be bristling up all round his head ; and he looked a good deal like a pugnacious little turkey-cock watching an opportunity to fly at somebody.

Mrs. Lutridge looked down on him from under her eyelids.

"Hum !" she said ; then, contemptuously declining the proposed combat, she turned back to Elsie.

"What is your name ?" she asked in a solemn tone, that suggested an intention of putting her through the Catechism.

"Elsie," said Elsie gravely, as she did when Grandmamma called her up to go through that exercise on Sunday afternoons.

"Elsie is not a name at all," objected Mrs. Lutridge. "It is a short. I suppose your real name is Alice, and you ought to have said so ; but I have observed that little girls kept at home as you are, seldom know how to answer a straightforward question properly."

"Is Elsie the short for Alice ?" said Elsie, suddenly flushing up, and in her eagerness taking hold of Mrs. Lutridge's rustling dress. "Oh, do tell me ; I should so like to think I was called Alice, like mamma ! I never knew before."

"Extraordinary !" exclaimed Mrs. Lutridge, in a loud aside to Miss Berry. "Extraordinary ! that the child should not know what her name is, or whether she is called after her mother or not ; *most* extraordinary, and, I should say, *very* unsatisfactory indeed ! Ursula and Maud, sit still where you are ; I don't wish you to come over to this side of the room. No, no, Sophia, you need not trouble yourself to hold out your doll. You have not the pleasure of little Miss Blake's acquaintance, and I daresay she does not care for dolls ; besides, it is time for us to go home.

"But the dear children," said Miss Berry, glancing anxiously at the dish of almonds and raisins on the sideboard, and making a rapid mental division of its contents. "To be sure there is not any great supply, but I can't bear the thought of their all going away without tasting anything ; and if you would only allow me to give them each a bunch to carry in their hands——"

"Certainly not," said Mrs. Lutridge emphatically ; "they go home to a plain, wholesome dinner, such as I consider it my duty, as the head of a Christian household, to provide for my family. *Luxuries* and *dainties*" (with a severe glance at the preserved ginger) "do not come within *my* means. Other

people, I suppose, make their own calculations ; and I can only hope that no carnal love of display, or desire to vie with their superiors, leads them into unjustifiable expenses. In our conspicuous position in the town we are, unhappily, obliged to keep up a certain appearance, and live in a certain style ; but how often do I, dear Miss Berry, when weighed down, as I so often am, with the cares my station entails, envy people like you, whose safe, humble position in life sets them free from so many burdensome necessities. With no claims on one's time, and no responsibilities, how easy it might be to lead a simple, happy, self-denying life, taking no thought for the morrow, restricting one's wants to the fewest necessities, in order to bestow one's superfluity in good works ; enjoying the spiritual blessing Mr. Pierrepont expatiated on so delightfully last Sunday, of 'having nothing.'"

"We have dessert every day at our house," struck in Steenie. "Almonds, and raisins, and preserved ginger, and guava jelly, and—prawns, and—and" (searching his memory desperately for further items, and stumbling by mistake on the principal products of St. Petersburg) "isinglass and caviare ; we have all that, every day, for dessert at our house."

Mrs. Lutridge, who had gently closed her eyes during her exordium to Miss Berry, opened them so suddenly that Elsie had a fancy she heard the eyelids click. "Steenie," she said, "I shall be sorry to feel obliged again to recommend your poor dear father to set you the third chapter of James to get by heart ; but unless you learn to bridle that unruly tongue——"

"He quite forgot to hear me say it the last time," cried Steenie triumphantly.

The delayed encounter threatened to become serious now, and Miss Berry, all agitated and fluttered as she was, threw herself between the combatants.

"Now, Steenie dear, you really are—and, dearest Mrs. Lutridge, boys, however well brought up, and with the best of clergymen for their fathers, will still be boys. I am sure I don't mean to excuse them for it, but I am very much afraid it is the case with them all ; and if I might suggest, since it is most likely past the dear children's dinner hour, will you not all sit down, and do me the favour to partake of what there is on the table ?"

Mrs. Lutridge was, however, unpersuadable on the subject of sitting down ; and as she had now kept the little party standing till their dinner was completely cold, she took her departure,

sweeping her train after her, and carrying a good deal of the sunshine and comfort out of the little room she had so abruptly invaded.

Miss Berry dispensed the cold viands with a concerned, crestfallen face, which had a momentary effect even on Steenie's spirits; and Elsie forgot to look forward to the afternoon's reading of the fairy tales, while she wondered why Mrs. Lutridge had been so sure that she would not care to play at dolls with her little daughter.

The appearance of the dessert unlocked their tongues, and tended to rouse their spirits a little.

"Steenie dear," Miss Berry began, as she divided the preserved ginger, "you know quite well that I never like to cast a gloom over the time we are together, but I am so very much afraid you went beyond the truth about the guava jelly and the prawns, and those other things you mentioned. I am sure I don't pretend to judge as to what a gentleman might fancy for dessert, but isinglass! I wish I could think you had not gone beyond the truth."

"She should not have begun jawing at you, then," said Steenie gloomily.

"Oh, my dear Steenie, but if you knew how it hurts me to think that for my sake you should have told a——"

"Cram," interrupted Steenie. "Well, Elderberry, I'm sorry; but she does make one tingle all over so, and feel in such a rage. One has not time to think what one is saying, and geography or anything that comes into one's head does for her. To please you, I'll behave better next time I see her."

This concession entirely banished the cloud from Miss Berry's kind face. Sunshine and content came back into the little room, and Elsie kept all her life a glowing recollection of the delights of the afternoon that followed.

Steenie took down, and explained to Elsie, the dilapidated mechanical toys that Miss Berry revered, not only as relics of her lost brother, but as the most wonderful inventions of the age. He made the wheels of all the little sand-mills run round, and got the water-clocks to tick, and the tumblers to tumble, and the painted paper ladies to dance to a tune Miss Berry played on her wheezy old piano; and Elsie felt as if she were transported to enchanted ground, with Steenie for magician, and thought she should never find it difficult to believe anything wonderful after this.

When they were tired of play, the two children sat on the

floor in the cosiest corner of the window recess, where the afternoon sun shone over their heads on to the fairy tale book held between them; and Miss Berry took up her knitting, and sat in an easy chair at the end of the room, and looked at the two rosy faces, and the two golden heads touching each other as they bent over the same page, and had a vision of herself—not being herself, but a different person (who might have existed surely)—living in a house where children did not come and go, but stayed always, and called her “mother.”

The children chattered a good deal at intervals in their reading, and Elsie discovered that Steenie's enjoyment of fairy tales was not lessened by the scruples and difficulties that troubled her. It was not that he was the more credulous of the two; but with him it was less a matter of vital importance to believe thoroughly, and live over again all that he read. A hazy, half belief was quite enough to carry him along with the story.

“What does it matter?” he said: “perhaps the white cat would have died in reality if her head had been cut off; but let us turn over the page and see how it goes on.”

“Ah, but it would have been so dreadful if she had died,” objected Elsie. “I wonder how the Prince could. Would you have done it, if you had been he?”

“Well, I don't know,” said Steenie. “It would have been for her good, as Mrs. Lutridge says; but do let us finish the story.”

After tea, Miss Berry sat between the two children in the window recess, and as the spring day faded, they watched the lights springing up in the houses and shops of the old fashioned, irregularly built street; and Miss Berry told them how she remembered it when there were no lamps, and people went about with lanterns after dark; and from that she drifted into the history of a flood which had occurred thirty years ago, when the waters of the Idle had filled all the lower streets of the town to the Market Cross; and related how her brother had jumped into the mill weir by Black Pool, when the waters were most disturbed, to save the lives of two little lambs that were being carried down the stream.

Elsie was so eloquent in praise of this action, that Steenie grew somewhat critical, and would not acknowledge that mill weirs were such very dangerous places to jump into, even at flood time, or that there was any such great merit in saving the lives of lambs that were sure to be killed in the end.

The Rectory stood just opposite Miss Berry's house, and as the self-willed rows of houses, in their determination to avoid every semblance of regularity, approached each other with a sudden curve at this part of the street, a person sitting in the dark at Miss Berry's window could command a very complete view of everything that passed in the Rector's study when the fire burned brightly, or the lamp was lighted.

Miss Berry was very conscientious about drawing down her blind, to save herself from the temptation of overlooking her neighbours; but to-night, with Steenie sitting by, there did not seem much harm in watching for the lighting-up of the opposite window, as it was to be the signal for Steenie's return home.

"There's our lamp!" cried Steenie. "Papa has come into his study, and is going to settle to his books, and I must go in there too and learn my lessons. It's a great bore. You can't think how dull the evenings are. I mayn't speak a word for fear of disturbing him. It's a great bore."

"O Steenie! and he says he liked to see you sitting there with your books, and he has no one else. My dear, don't go this minute: I want to say something I have had on my conscience for a long time. Steenie, you know I don't like to cast a gloom——"

"Fire away," interrupted Steenie rather gloomily. "You may jaw me as much as you like, Elderberry, because I like you, and you ain't Mrs. Lutridge."

"My dear, I don't know what you mean by 'jaw.' I hope you may be able to relieve my mind. It was a fortnight ago, Steenie, at the Spring Fair time, when the giant, and the lady with two heads, and all the shows were on the Green, and your dear father gave it out as his opinion that the school children and everybody should be discouraged from going to the fair, because the shows and things partook of the nature of vanities. O Steenie, I am so sadly afraid you went one Saturday evening on the sly."

There was a moment's pause, and then Steenie burst out. "Bob Lutridge told you! the sneak! I dared him to tell his mother, so he comes to you."

"No, it was not Master Lutridge. I went down that Saturday night to one of the cottages on the Green to take some wine to a sick person, and as I came back I saw a boy I was afraid was you coming out of a show with a crowd of rough people. O Steenie, it gave me such a turn to see *you* in such company, and your father such a good man."

"I wish my father was a bad man," said Steenie passionately. "Oh, you need not shake your head at me, Berry, for I do—I do. I should not have everybody interfering with me then, and spying about me, and doing all they can to make me hate him. And he—he would care more for me; he would have taken me to the fair himself, as Jack Thomson's father took him. Yes, I do wish my father was a bad man."

"My dear, you don't know what it means to have a father who is a bad man," said Miss Berry, sighing, and glancing round her little room, which would not have been as poor as it was if her early family experience had been what it ought to have been.

Steenie felt more uneasy in the grave silence that followed than a prolonged lecture would have made him.

"There was no harm in it all," he said. "I never should have gone if Bob Lutridge had not boasted so; and he saw without paying by looking through the chinks. The giant was not worth seeing, and the lady had not two heads."

"O Steenie, I don't mind so much about what you saw; it's your going on the sly that hurts me so. Your father is too busy to look after you. He has our instruction to think of, and you should not blame us for being anxious over you. We think of him shut up in his study studying to teach us—and—and—of your mother being in heaven. Steenie dear, if I were you I would just walk into the study now, and tell him all about it."

Steenie jumped up and stood silent for a few minutes, looking into the room, where he could see his father's figure pacing up and down. Even in the dim light Elsie could see that his lips were pressed tightly together and his hands clenched.

"He would scarcely listen to me when I began first," the boy said, "and then he would look so, and there would be such a great deal of talk. He would not punish me; I should not mind that half as much, but he would talk. It would be much harder than jumping into the mill weir after the lambs."

"Yes," said Elsie quickly, "but you said you should like to have something harder to do than that."

"Well, good-night, Berry; good-night, little Elsie, I am going now," the boy said.

"And you will tell your father? Nothing will set you right but that," Miss Berry persisted anxiously.

"I can't promise; perhaps I shall, and perhaps I shan't," said Steenie roughly. He slammed the room door, then opened it, and poked his head in for half a second.

"I say, you may look at our house, and if you see me go

straight into the study, you'll know I'm doing it; but I shall be wishing it was the mill weir all the time."

He darted off again, and the two left behind sat in their places watching the street silently.

They heard the front door shut, saw Steenie's figure flash across the street and enter the house opposite, and for the next minute they hardly breathed.

"He has done it!" cried Elsie triumphantly; "there he is going into the study. I see his head between the lamp and the wall. Mr. Pierrepont is sitting down now. Steenie has gone to him. He is beginning to speak. Mr. Pierrepont looks up from his book, so suddenly."

"My dear, I think we ought to draw down the blind now," said Miss Berry. "I am always very particular about not looking across into the Rectory rooms. You shall get your hat and cape, and I will take you home myself, for I never let my little maid Caroline go out after sunset."

It was long past Elsie's bedtime when she reached home, and Grandmamma did not encourage any talk about the day's adventures, but hurried her to bed at once. The drawing-room looked a little darker, and Aunt Margaret's face a little sadder and stiller than usual, Elsie thought; but perhaps it was the contrast with the other rooms, and the other faces, she had seen that day, that struck her.

However, when she got upstairs she found, on the drawers opposite her bed, the package of pink and white muslin, and the rosebud hat, to console her, and remain lasting witnesses of her happy adventures. Grandmamma seemed rather out of spirits about the purchases, and did not encourage Elsie to admire them while she was being put to bed.

"Aunt Margaret does not think them suitable," she said sorrowfully. "Let them stay where they are, dear; I don't want to think of them any more to-night." But when Grandmamma had left the room, Elsie got out of bed in her night-dress, and tried the rosebud hat on before the glass. The little pink buds looked very nice, she thought, among her tumbled curls; and when Steenie drew another picture of her walking along the road with Aunt Margaret, he would certainly put the rosebud hat into his drawing, and make her look as smart as any other Oldbury child.

It was a long time before Elsie fell asleep after she got to bed again; and when the slumber came, it was troubled with curiously mixed-up pictures of what she had seen during the

day, the map, with all the scroll-work in it, forming fresh scenes every minute; Steenie jumping into the mill weir; herself the white cat, and Steenie drawing a sword to cut her head off. She woke with a start, and thought what a long night it had been, and wondered why there was candle-light instead of daylight in the room. Then she peeped through the curtain, and saw Aunt Margaret seated at a table with a candle before her. She had Elsie's hat in her hand, and a pair of scissors, and she was deliberately cutting out all the rosebuds, and the pretty pink bows from the trimming inside and out.

Elsie felt, for a moment, quite strong and brave in the swelling of her anger, as if she must jump out of bed, and snatch the hat from Margaret, and punish her somehow. Oh, it was cruel, it was unjust, she would not bear it! Then she began to tremble very much. On a second glance there was something in Margaret's face, as she sat at her work of destruction, something solemn, before which even Elsie's childish passion fell back baffled. Margaret was not, Elsie knew by a sort of instinct, thinking of her, or of the hat mainly, as the bright scissors wrought such havoc. Nothing she could say on the matter, no argument she could bring forward, would have anything to do with Margaret's thoughts.

Elsie lay back on her pillow fascinated, and watched one pretty bud after another fall to the ground, till the poor hat had lost all its beauty. Then she saw Margaret replace the hat on the drawers, cover it up, and kneel down at a chair, a little distance from the bed, to say her prayers. She covered her face as she knelt; Margaret never looked up to pray, but, oh! the way in which she threw herself down, the agony of supplication her upstretched arms and hands expressed!

Elsie let the curtain fall, and buried her face in the pillow. She felt very cold, and sick, and shivery; she did not care at all about the rosebud hat now. Steenie, and Miss Berry, and the bright little room where she had spent the afternoon, seemed to have moved a long way off from her.

She wished that Margaret would be quick, and get into bed. She wished she dare put her arms round her and kiss her when she came. She had been so excited by the different events of the day, and was now so frightened, she would have been glad to get near any one, even Margaret. Hitherto the shadow that enshrouded the household had lain outside little Elsie; to-night, for the first time, the cold chill of it fell on her heart.

CHAPTER VII.

VISITORS TO OLDBURY.

ABOUT a week after Elsie's visit to Miss Berry, Lady Selina Deane arrived at the Rectory to pass a month with her son-in-law, as she had been in the habit of doing once in every two or three years since her daughter's death. Her coming and going no longer made a commotion in Oldbury, though on this occasion it brought a little variety into the lives of Elsie and Margaret—the last people in the place whom such an event might have been expected to concern.

The Oldbury people had grown accustomed to Lady Selina by this time, and had learned to regard her complacently as a credit to the place. She had aged a good deal in the last twelve years, and no longer dashed along the roads in her chariot. She was wheeled by a tall footman along the sunny side of the street in a Bath chair, which could not run down any one, and was yet rather a nice object for the Oldbury people to point out to strangers.

"That is Lady Selina Deane, our Rector's mother-in-law. Yes, I know her very well—she is nodding to me from her chair, and I should cross over the road to speak to her, only she is such an invalid we never like to tempt her to stop in the street," was a speech made many times a day, while Lady Selina was staying at the Rectory, by all sorts of people, from Mrs. Lutridge herself to Mrs. Adams, the dissenting brewer's wife, who was not at all accustomed to the distinction of bows from the genteel church-going portion of the community. So long as she was not required to expose herself to draughts at the corners of the irregularly built Oldbury streets, Lady Selina was quite ready to nod and smile at everybody who claimed her acquaintance.

She had forgotten all about the old feuds, if indeed she had ever clearly understood them, and at the bottom of her heart considered distinctions between Oldbury people as far too microscopic to be taken into account by her. They were all just Oldbury townsfolk ; and if they liked to come into the Rector's drawing room of an afternoon, while she rested on the sofa and sipped her tea, one was as welcome as another.

She talked quite affably to every one who came. Lady Selina always talked—from the moment she woke till she slept again—about her own health ; about the difficulty she had in finding a hair-wash to keep her hair from turning grey ; about her never having had the measles till she was turned twenty, and her having nearly died in them the year after she married ; about the fright she had felt when a fire broke out in the stables at Compton Deane forty years ago ; about the offers of marriage her daughters had refused, and the lack of worldly wisdom they had all finally displayed in their choice of husbands. She said the same things in the same evenly flowing patter of words to whomsoever happened to be with her ; and though she preferred discoursing to the intimates of her own circle, she would rather have had Mrs. Adams for listener than be left in solitude.

The Oldbury people took her condescension in good part, and attributed the monstrous ignorance respecting their names, and the circumstances of their families, she frequently betrayed, to the growing infirmities of age rather than to indifference as to their individualities.

Mrs. Lutridge, indeed, would sometimes break the thread of a story to remonstrate with Lady Selina on a habit she had of calling her friends "good souls," and "excellent creatures." "When we are none of us good, but altogether evil, and conceived in sin, you know, dear Lady Selina," she would interpose ; but Lady Selina took up her discourse quite composedly when the interruption was over. She did not care to argue the point. Mrs. Lutridge and the other Oldbury ladies might be quite as corrupt and abominable as Mrs. Lutridge said they were. It did not matter in the least to her ; she went on calling her own acquaintance "good souls," with a serene conviction that they belonged to a totally different order of creation.

Observing the little impression her words made, Mrs. Lutridge had naturally a poor opinion of Lady Selina's spiritual state, and was disposed to be severe on Mr. Pierrepont for not dealing faithfully with his mother-in-law. Yet she herself was obliged to endure her misgivings in comparative silence. Even while Lady

Selina was telling her the silliest stories, and showing the most deplorable ignorance on the religious questions of the day, there was something about her that made Mrs. Lutridge find it impossible to cross-question her, and put her down, and lay her faults in order before her, as she would have done if she had been an Oldbury washerwoman. She called many times at the Rectory with a full intention of speaking the truth in love; but she always found Lady Selina's bland impenetrability too much for her, and had to go away somewhat crestfallen, and surprised at herself.

This year there was less chance than usual of Mrs. Lutridge's finding the long expected opportunity for plain speaking. Lady Selina brought with her to the Rectory, besides her maid and her footman and her Bath chair, a little granddaughter, who was always to be found seated on a stool by Lady Selina's sofa in the drawing-room, during the two hours when visitors were admitted. A dark-eyed, thin mite of a child, with bony little shoulders sticking out (as Mrs. Lutridge would not have allowed the shoulders of any of her daughters to stick out) from a fantastically fashioned but rather shabby afternoon dress, and with silky black hair strained back from her face, and tied with crimson ribbons, in a fashion quite new, at that time, to Oldbury.

Mrs. Lutridge pronounced that she looked like nothing but a bedizened French doll; and though French dolls were not familiar objects in Oldbury, the comparison was generally considered a very happy one.

Lady Selina bestowed very little attention on her granddaughter after the first introduction of her to the visitors was over. "This is my poor dear daughter Lady Russel's only child," she would say to each person who entered. "She is called Cecil, after her father, Sir Cecil Russel. Small for her age, you see, and brown, remarkably brown, as all the Russels are. We were all tall and fair in my family, and Steenie Pierrepont promises to be like us; but poor little Cecil is a thorough Russel: no one will ever take her to be my granddaughter." After saying this, Lady Selina would forget all about the child; and if the conversation happened to drift that way (it never seemed a matter of *will* with her), she would expatiate on the disappointment she had suffered when her youngest and prettiest daughter insisted on marrying Sir Cecil Russel, and going out with him in the embassy to Russia, when she might have made a better match and stayed in England, and been alive now. From that she would perhaps pass on to bemoan Sir Cecil's want of consideration

towards her, in throwing the charge of his disgracefully brown little daughter on her hands, while he accepted diplomatic appointments at the ends of the earth, on pretext of being too broken-hearted to stay quietly at home.

All this, and a great deal more of the same description, she would at times pour forth in her quick inflexible voice, with as little thought about the small figure at her feet, as if it had been the bedizened doll of which it reminded Mrs. Lutridge.

No one of all the visitors, perhaps, ever remarked how the quick dark eyes kindled and flashed, and how indignantly the little brown fingers twitched the thread through the work while the talk went on.

A bedizened doll was Oldbury's first verdict on little Cecil; but before she had been a week at the Rectory she had contrived to be seen by almost everybody in the place, in circumstances that caused Mrs. Lutridge's comparison to be forgotten.

She did not look at all like a French doll, the day she and Steenie were dragged by the miller's man out of the Idle, where they had fallen, one over the other, as they were trying to creep across the mill dam.

Mrs. Adams was present at the disrobing of Cecil in the miller's kitchen afterwards, and she edified all Oldbury with an account of the dilapidated state of the child's under-garments. After that day, Mrs. Adams believed everything the radical newspaper her husband studied said about the extravagance and vices of the aristocracy. She had seen it with her own eyes, she said. That child's clothes (good clothes tumbling to pieces for want of a stitch in time) proved to her what the whole set of titled ladies, and their mismanaged servants, were worth.

Mrs. Lutridge had soon as much to say against Cecil's manners as Mrs. Adams had about her clothes. She was making Steenie Pierrepont more unmanageable than ever. There seemed to be nothing too preposterous for the two children to venture upon when they were together.

They dressed up Miss Tomlinson's fat poodle dog in Miss Berry's front and a pair of Mr. Pierrepont's bands, and turned it into the national school room, where Mrs. Lutridge was giving a Scripture lesson. They nearly frightened their next door neighbour, Mr. Bolton, the oldest Oldbury inhabitant, into a fit, by climbing over their garden wall into his cherry tree, and peeping at him through the window just as he was taking his false teeth out after dinner.

The most aggravating feature of the case (in Mrs. Lutridge's

opinion) was that Mr. Pierrepont received the numerous complaints that reached him of his son's misdemeanours rather indifferently.

The plain little brown child, who never seemed the least bit afraid of him, but would run up to him in his most absent moods and force him to notice her by pulling at his hand, had managed to bewitch him somehow.

He was out in the garden among the June roses and lilies that year almost as often as in one other summer of his life; and such pleasant sounds of laughter and mingled voices floated over the wall, that it required some resolution on Miss Berry's part to keep her rule of not looking across the road towards the Rectory premises more than was needful. Of course Steenie had taken Cecil, the very day after her arrival, to Miss Berry's house to show her the map. And Cecil soon fell into a habit of running in there whenever she felt dull at the Rectory, and of repairing to Miss Berry to have the misfortunes to her dress, which were the usual consequence of a ramble with Steenie, set to rights.

It was during the darning of a terrible rent in Cecil's frock that the little scheme was concocted which drew Margaret and Elsie into the sphere of interest and excitement created by Lady Selina's visit to Oldbury that year.

Old Mrs. Blake had walked down the hill, and called on Miss Berry to thank her for her kindness to her little granddaughter; and in the course of conversation she lamented Margaret's continued indisposition, which she feared would prevent her taking her usual outdoor exercise while the pleasant weather lasted. "And going out in the air is the one only thing Margaret cares for," Mrs. Blake added, with tears rising in her kind old eyes.

Lady Selina's Bath chair and her footman were standing before the Rectory door at the moment, and a bright thought flashed into Miss Berry's head. The chair was only in use an hour or so during the day, and the footman had been hunted out of three several public-houses by Mrs. Lutridge during the last twenty-four hours. Why should not Margaret Blake find employment for both in their idle time? She opened the matter to Cecil, who ran in to have her frock mended just as Mrs. Blake went away, and the outspoken, fearless child, who could say exactly what she liked to everybody, undertook the negotiation gladly, and returned in the course of the afternoon with a favourable answer. After tea Miss Berry put on her

bonnet, and walked up the hill to the Blakes' house to propound her plan.

She was shown into the drawing-room, and, for the first time, found all the members of the family together : Mr. Blake in an arm chair, with a great book on his lap, the leaves of which he fluttered nervously all the time she stayed ; Margaret on a sofa placed where the air from the window could blow on her face, her hands lying idle before her ; Mrs. Blake and Elsie at a side-table a good deal withdrawn from the other two—Elsie playing a game at solitaire, and Mrs. Blake looking on through her spectacles.

Here were the elements of a happy family group ; old people and young looking at, and speaking to, each other with an anxious tenderness of voice and manner, which struck Miss Berry as denoting a more than usually deep mutual affection : yet, somehow or other, this household picture did not leave the happy impression on her mind that peeps into other family rooms had done. Her own solitary sitting-room had a more cheerful air, she thought.

Margaret sat upright on the sofa as soon as Miss Berry began to explain her errand, with a refusal hanging on her lips ; but before she could speak, Mrs. Blake struck in—

"My love, Margaret, you know it is the only thing to do you good, and you have longed for the fresh air so. It is Miss Berry's own thought ; I said nothing. Lady Selina Deane offers us this accommodation from friendliness to Miss Berry, not to us. Think of it, Margaret."

Then Margaret dropped her head on her hands, and a sharp struggle went on in her mind. It was bitter to her, and contrary to all her resolutions, to accept a favour *now*—from strangers too, who knew nothing about her or her family. Her proud, upright spirit revolted, as against a sort of fraud. She, at all events, had meant to be so independent, to stand aloof from all favour and pity so clearly. Was she conquered like the rest ? Must she accept considerations, consolations, that she had promised herself to do without for ever ?

Yet what her mother said was true. She did long for the fresh air with a feverish, thirsty longing. There was a certain spot, about a mile from the town, where a break in the swelling green hills that shut Oldbury in allowed the eye, on a sunny day, to catch a gleam on the farthest horizon ; a steely glitter against the quiet blue of the sky, which showed that the sea was there, miles away. Margaret would stand on that spot at times,

and gaze, till all the stony despair passed out of her face, and Elsie would often look up at her in wonder, and say, "A bit of the blue sky has got into your eyes, Aunt Margaret."

To catch that far-off glitter once more—to look away, out of prison, and know there was free space beyond—would make her strong again, Margaret thought, and the temptation to accept Miss Berry's kindness increased as she pondered. Her habitually denied and crushed down inclination cried out for that one indulgence.

"And it is not what any one could call a favour to you," Miss Berry here broke in on Margaret's reverie. She had seen the colour slowly mounting into Margaret's forehead, and had been turning over in her mind how to put her proposal in the most favourable light. "I'm sure it's just as much, or indeed I might say rather more, for the benefit of that unfortunate footman of Lady Selina's, that I urge this plan upon you. Such a true kindness it would be to fill up his idle hours; for in spite of all Mrs. Lutridge can do, 'Satan finds some mischief still,' you know, dear Mrs. Blake; and the number of public-houses there are in the High Street you must have heard mentioned as a scandal to the place. If Miss Margaret would but be brought to see the matter in the light of a charitable work."

Margaret looked up and smiled; she was not a person to be reconciled to a course of conduct by trying to see it in a "light," but the kind-heartedness that prompted Miss Berry's little exaggeration touched her.

"It is a very great favour you are offering me," she said, holding out her hand, "and I accept it gratefully. You must make Lady Selina Deane understand how true a kindness she is conferring."

Old Mrs. Blake followed Miss Berry to the front door when she went away, and loaded her with thanks; but it was the tone of voice in which Margaret had spoken, and the expression on her face as she held out her hand, that dwelt in Miss Berry's thoughts all the time she was walking home.

She had gone as near disliking Margaret Blake as she could dislike anybody, and now she found herself obliged to reverse all the opinions she had formed of her. It was almost as if she had beheld an actual transformation take place under her eyes.

"I wish I could explain it to you," she said to old Mrs. Bolton, who beckoned her from the window as she passed, and made her come across the road to explain why she had got on her visiting bonnet so late in the day. "I wish I could make you

understand what I feel about Margaret Blake to-night. There have I been calling her cold and proud ever since I knew her, and when she spoke to me this evening there was a look on her face—I'm not clever at putting things into words, but I can't recollect it without the tears coming into my eyes; it was almost dreadfully humble, as if she wanted to beg my pardon for taking hold of my hand; and I have been calling her proud."

"Ah, I daresay hers is the pride that apes humility, as some poet cleverly puts it," remarked Mrs. Bolton, shaking her head knowingly.

Mrs. Bolton had been the literary character of Oldbury in her youth, and she still retained a store of quotations in her memory, though she was apt to introduce them somewhat at haphazard now-a-days.

Miss Berry made no answer, for she had a hazy impression that a well known quotation carried an authority with it, that settled a dispute without further appeal; but her puzzle respecting Margaret's character was not by any means set at rest.

CHAPTER VIII.

A BREATH OF SPRING.

The phenomenon of Margaret Blake taking an airing in Lady Selina Deane's chair afforded occasion for an immense amount of speculation in the town.

It was very strange, the gossips said to one another, these Blakes made a pretence of keeping in the background, and here they were receiving an attention such as no one else in the place would have dreamed of aspiring to.

By and bye it came out that the loan of the chair was the least part of the distinction with which Margaret was honoured. Two or three days after she was first seen in it, there was a rumour going about the town that Mr. Pierrepont had been seen walking beside the chair, and that he had actually helped the footman to wheel it up a steep bit of road to a certain spot on the downs Miss Blake had set her heart on reaching.

Some of the ladies looked quite curiously at Margaret when she appeared at church the next day, to see if she were not a little altered by such an extraordinary occurrence. *They* could not have lifted their veils, and looked composedly up into the preacher's face, if he had distinguished them in such a marked way a few hours before. They wondered very much what Margaret thought about it.

Margaret thought enough about the encounter to take the precaution of choosing a very straight, even road for her ride the next time she went out; but her care did not secure her against having to accept Mr. Pierrepont's escort again. It might be accident or it might be design, but just as Margaret in her chair, and Elsie, who was walking by its side, were turning away from the town street, he overtook them with Steenie and Cecil for

his companions, all evidently bound for the same quiet path by the river-side Margaret had chosen. It was impossible to make any objection when Mr. Pierrepont proposed that the three children should join company and search the bank for wild flowers together. After this second meeting it became an established custom, that on every particularly fine day, when the chair made a longer excursion than usual, Mr. Pierrepont, Steenie, and Cecil should join the party somewhere.

Margaret thought at first that this unlooked-for companionship would quite spoil the pleasure of her rides; she often said to herself that she must give them up, or restrict them to the immediate neighbourhood of the town. Yet though she said this almost every day, she did not make any change. She allowed herself to be tempted to visit one hitherto unexplored spot in the neighbourhood after another, of which Mr. Pierrepont vaunted the beauties.

One day it was a wooded hollow among the hills he took her to see, where a mimic waterfall leapt out from the cliff side and lost itself among the rushes and yellow flags and blue forget-me-nots that carpeted the bottom of the ravine; then it was a shaded pasture field, where the children could gather cowslips, and where some very ancient yew trees and the traces of an old abbey were to be found. Everywhere up among the hills and in the sheltered lowlands there was the fresh young summer calling Margaret to turn her back on sad thoughts, and come out into the sweet sunshine and be healed of her wounds. Never yet since the sad crisis of her life had she felt so tempted towards happiness and forgetfulness. Might not memory sleep a little space while nature was so busy covering up and putting away every trace of her winter bareness? Margaret did not ask herself the question, but for the next few weeks she let the tranquil hours slip past her without looking backwards or forwards.

During these walks the children played, and quarrelled, and kept out of the way of their elders, as children will; and meanwhile Margaret and Mr. Pierrepont, without exactly knowing how it came about, fell into easy, pleasant, intimate talk with each other.

The good Oldbury people, who watched the party coming back through the town in the cool of the evening—Cecil perched on her uncle's shoulder, and Elsie and Steenie, with their hands full of wild flowers, running on before—would have been very much puzzled if they could have had their

wish and overheard the conversation which Mr. Pierrepont lingered at the Blake's gate to finish with one sentence more. It was very different from any talk they could have conceived of as likely to pass between people in the state of mind which they attributed to Mr. Pierrepont and Margaret.

It never touched on any personal topic, and yet day by day it grew more intimate and more familiar, in fact, than Margaret meant it to be. There is a sort of conversation that can be carried on with very little revelation of the inner self; but solitary people, given to reading and thinking, seldom have the art of keeping it up for long. Being scantily provided with counterfeit coin, they are soon forced to bring out their gold. Margaret was one of those persons who, if they speak at all, must speak on subjects that really interest them; and before long Mr. Pierrepont discovered that he had a companion with whom he might venture to discuss topics out of the ordinary range of Oldbury interests. It was a delightful discovery to him. It was long since he had ventured to speak out his thoughts freely without fear of being misunderstood; longer still since he had conversed with one who could suggest as well as follow, who could catch at and supply a half remembered quotation, and make a hazy thought clear by a graceful, apt comparison.

He fell into a way of recalling Margaret's sayings as he was walking up and down his study in the twilight, and of mentally continuing the conversation that had, perhaps, been left unfinished at the Blakes' gate; till somehow the dark study looked less empty and forlorn than it had done of late years. Other thoughts than sad memories, thoughts that had to do with pleasures to be enjoyed next day, began to weave themselves about the book-cases, and to fill the dusky corners; and he would go to the window when the dew began to fall, and call the children to the house in a gay voice, and laugh and play with them for the rest of the evening. As the long June and July days wore pleasantly away, the Oldbury people began to remark frequently on the change this summer had wrought in Mr. Pierrepont's appearance. He was growing young again, they said. His good looks had come back to him; his shoulders lost the stoop they had acquired from poring so long over his books; his step had the spring in it that people remembered twelve years before; he stopped his acquaintance in the streets to chat with them, in the pleasant, cordial way that had made him so popular when he first came to Oldbury.

Steenie adored his father at this time, and defied Mrs. Lutridge ever to make mischief between them again ; and Cecil retained all her life a vivid recollection of Uncle Stephen's pleasantness and kindness during that summer's visit to the Rectory.

The gossips thought they understood the cause of Mr. Pierrepont's restored spirits well enough, and had few doubts about what was to be the result of the new turn things had taken ; whereas the truth was, that but for an accident that occurred just before Lady Selina Deane left Oldbury, Mr. Pierrepont might never have made the discovery about his own feelings that was so clear to them, and might have allowed circumstances to drift him away from intimacy with Margaret Blake as easily as he had been led into it. The pleasant June days would have remained a happy memory to him, clouded only by the wondering regret one feels in recalling an agreeable acquaintanceship one has let slip without apparent reason.

The circumstance that altered the character of Mr. Pierrepont's recollections of that summer, occurred the very day before Lady Selina's departure would have put a stop to the Bath chair excursions in a natural way.

The hay harvest was over, and the bare, still fields by the river made such a charming play-ground for the children, that Margaret found it difficult to tempt them away for longer excursions.

There was one especially pleasant field behind the Rectory garden, through which a lazy, willow shaded curve of the Idle flowed, and no persuasion could draw the children from the water when once they had got to play there. Margaret usually had her chair drawn under the shade of the hedge, and resigned herself to await her companions' pleasure. When she was quite alone she liked it ; there was no prettier spot near Oldbury. The town, though close at hand, was hidden by a curve of the hill, only the tall spire of the old church could be seen springing up into the sky. The wide fields were very still now the hay-making was over, and the little Idle could be traced for miles up and down the valley—a tiny silver thread woven in and out among the rich greens, and browns, and yellows of the fields, widening here and there into lazy pools where the cattle stood ruminating.

Margaret could sometimes recline in her chair and look over all this peace, till an answering peacefulness stole into her heart ; at other moments it had a contrary effect on her. She

would hide her eyes suddenly, while a spasm of pain passed over her face, a contrasted picture had risen before her mind and blasted all the beauty ; she would do penance for forgetfulness by shutting out the sunlight and seeing only that.

When the children were her sole companions, she could indulge her changeful moods secure from observation ; but when Mr. Pierrepont came and sat on the grass at her feet, she had a feeling that it would be better to be moving on. She talked to him because it was safer for her to talk than to follow her own thoughts in company ; and sometimes she grew animated, and felt an excitement and interest in his society such as she had imagined could never come to her again. But the interest was only momentary. When she thought over the interview afterwards, she was surprised and angry with herself for having been surprised out of her usual reserve.

One sultry, thundery day, she was rather annoyed at the urgency with which Mr. Pierrepont seconded Elsie's request that the path to the fields, instead of the road to the downs, should be chosen for their walk.

Politeness obliged her to yield, but she was vexed. The party could have kept together on the upland road, and she was that day particularly indisposed for the long *tête-à-tête* that an afternoon in the fields was sure to bring.

She was a little more stately than usual during the ride, a little more silent, a little more anxious to prevent Mr. Pierrepont from troubling himself to steady the chair while they were going down the steep street. Mr. Pierrepont was far too sensitive to changes of manner not to perceive this difference in hers. When they turned into the fields, he went straight to the river with the children, instead of seating himself by her side when the servant left her in her shady corner.

He was not offended, but he had been struck, and his attention had been turned to her as she affected himself in a way that had not occurred before. As he stood leaning against a tree by the river, pretending to watch the children's manœuvres with their boat, he thought more of Margaret—of Margaret herself, not of the subjects they discussed together—than he had yet done.

He recalled sudden gleams of pleasure that had come into her eyes, when one or another beautiful view had opened on her first ; little quick turns of her head, disdainful or approving,

or the brightening of the landscape by an unexpected sunbeam, had charmed them into sudden silences.

He must have felt these things at the time, yet it seemed as if he were only now conscious how deeply they had moved him. It would be blindness indeed not to see how superior Margaret Blake was to any one in Oldbury. In Oldbury! Had he ever in his life seen any one to be compared with her anywhere? He did not choose to pursue the thought farther just then. He stooped down, gathered a branch of flowering willow herb, and walked with it in his hand to Margaret's chair, intending to make her observe its delicately tinted leaves and carved ivory pistil. Margaret was not as ready to listen to a lecture on botany as usual. She was sitting forward, looking uneasily at some object in the next field.

"I have been wishing for you," she said. "Is not that a bull there behind the hedge? I am not foolish enough to expect every bull I see to run at me, but this creature seems very restless. He has been gradually coming nearer to us for the last ten minutes, and I think the flutter of the children's dresses as they run about the field excites him. There—listen!"

An angry, sullen bellow coming from behind the hedge, close to Margaret, made Mr. Pierrepoint turn sharply round.

"I don't think the creature can get at us," he said, "but I will wheel you nearer the gate."

"No, no, never mind me—the children. Ah! here they come. Cecil screaming—how unlucky!"

The child's cries, and the flutter of her red ribbons, as she flew hatless past the hedge, completed the animal's exasperation. Fortunately for them they succeeded in reaching Mr. Pierrepoint and Margaret a second or so before it burst through the hedge, a few yards from where the chair stood.

"Run to the gate with the children," Margaret said again. "Never mind me. What *can* it signify about me?"

Mr. Pierrepoint did not altogether lose his presence of mind, but he was bewildered by the conflicting claims of the party he had to protect. He could not bear to leave Margaret, helpless as she was, and Cecil clung to his hands and prevented his doing anything.

Meanwhile Margaret, by a great effort of strength, twisted the Bath chair round and sat facing the bull, which was approaching slowly, stopping after every few paces to toss his head and roar. The gaze of her steady eyes brought him to a standstill at a little distance from her chair.

"Now, now!" she cried again.

By this time Steenie, who had lingered to secure his boat, came up, walking leisurely to show his contempt for the girls' terrors. Mr. Pierrepont disengaged Cecil's clinging hands from himself and put them in Steenie's.

"Run as fast as you can with your cousin to the gate," he said. "Don't drag her down; be careful of her. And send some one to us. Go at once;" for Steenie, with a boy's curiosity to see what would happen next, hesitated.

A loud roar and another advance on the part of the bull decided him, and gave wings to poor little Cecil's feet. As they flew down the sloping field together the bull half turned to follow them, but Margaret snatched a scarf from her neck, and directed his attention from them by waving it in the air. Elsie stood quite still all this time. She had not screamed or clung to Mr. Pierrepont as Cecil did; and since no one had said anything about her running away, she supposed she was to stay where she was. Steenie had not held out a hand to help her; she was sick and trembling with fright; and it was easier to stand still by Margaret, though she did not seem to know she was there, than to run away alone. To her surprise Margaret stretched an arm back, drew her into the shelter of the chair, and held her close, all without once moving her head or relaxing her steadfast gaze.

The strain did not continue many minutes. As soon as Mr. Pierrepont's hands were released from Cecil's grasp, he proceeded to drag a stake from the hedge, and attacked the bull behind. Some labourers from another field shortly came to his assistance, and in a little time the enemy was driven off, and secured from attempting further mischief.

Margaret leaned back in the chair when the danger was over, perfectly composed and quiet; the colour in her cheeks had neither deepened nor faded, and she did not say a word to Elsie, though she kept her arms clasped round her.

When Mr. Pierrepont returned from the farther corner of the field where the bull had been finally captured, he was a little disappointed to find such a very unconcerned face turned towards him.

He came up brandishing his stick lightly in his hand, with a countenance all flushed and beaming. It had been decidedly an exciting adventure to him. Clergymen of his way of thinking have few opportunities of exercising personal prowess, or giving vent (except by words) to the combativeness they possibly share with other men. He had not done anything so

muscular as dragging a stake from a hedge, or chasing a live creature across a field, since he left school.

The exertion had made his blood flow more quickly, and had given him a sense of being fully alive, and of having a body, which he did not often experience. It was a disagreeable check to his complacency to see how very quietly his companion in danger took it all. A little eager talk over the adventure, a congratulatory hand-clasp to celebrate their escape, would only have been natural between them after what had happened, he thought. It surprised and did not altogether please him to hear Margaret begin to speak in an indifferent tone on another subject directly he came near.

"I fear our troubles are not quite over yet," she said. "I have broken one of the wheels of the chair in turning it round, and shall find it a difficult matter to get home. Perhaps I can manage to walk as far as the field-gate, and a carriage might be sent to meet me there. Will you help me up, and let me try what I can do?"

The first attempt to move, however, brought a look of suffering into Margaret's face that caused Mr. Pierrepont to insist on her remaining where she was, while he hurried home for help.

In a little time he returned with two men-servants, who undertook to carry Margaret and the chair as far as the Rectory garden, where it was agreed she and Elsie were to remain till a carriage could be got ready to take them up the hill.

Margaret and her bearers left the field first, and Mr. Pierrepont followed, carrying Elsie in his arms.

It frightened her a good deal when he stooped down and lifted her up. She thought every one in the town would know about it, and point her out always as the little girl the clergyman had carried in his arms. But often afterwards, when she was very tired, she remembered how firmly and tenderly he had held her, and what a kind face it was into which she was forced to look closely up; not at all like the face in the pulpit she stared sleepily at on Sundays. She often wondered how it came to look so different that day, and whether she really had seen the happy smile she fancied had beamed down on her as she laid her head on his shoulder. It helped Elsie very much in an after-trial that she had treasured up the kind look in her memory, and could recall it more easily than any other look the same face came to wear to her in other times.

Steenie and Cecil were peering from the Rectory garden door when Mr. Pierrepont and Elsie came up. Margaret had already been carried in, and was resting on a garden seat.

Mr. Pierrepont let Elsie down softly from his arms, and hastened towards Margaret.

"My Uncle Stephen carrying you!" said Cecil, opening her eyes wide, and ruffling with jealous dignity.

"You left me," said Elsie reproachfully; "you ran away both of you, and left me to be tossed by that fierce bull. I would not have left you."

"Oh! I say," cried Steenie, "when you know it was all his fault. I did not want to go."

"You did not want to go with me?" pouted Cecil. "You like Elsie best."

"Yes, I do," said Steenie, putting an arm round Elsie's neck and kissing her roughly; "she's a thousand times prettier than you, I can tell you. I will like her best if I choose, and you may tell Grandmamna and Papa that I say so, if you please—there, now."

The little dark-browed maiden's lips pouted and trembled; then she gave her small head a miniature toss.

"Come away, and let us feed the rabbits," she said suddenly, with the air of a person who has taken her position and means to make the best of it. "You may like Elsie best if you please, cousin Steenie. I am going away to-morrow; and Grandmamna says you are a very awkward boy. Let us play with the rabbits."

The children were soon quite happy together again; but Margaret waited impatiently for the carriage that was to convey her home. She had refused to enter the Rectory; she had never entered any house in Oldbury but her own, and never meant to do so; yet she did not like her present position on one of the Rectory garden seats, with Mr. Pierrepont standing near, much better than a visit to the house. And just then, the thought that she had taken her last ride in the Bath chair came vividly before her, and filled her with sadness.

"It had been very pleasant," she said to herself, "but such a break in her life must never come again—never. If her health failed, and she became permanently disabled from walking, and had to confine herself altogether to the house, she must just bear it. She would not accept any more favours; she would not see any more fresh faces, or allow the faintest germs

of interests, and likings, that must be crushed ruthlessly in the end, to creep into her heart again ; not again—never again.”

She sat, looking fixedly at a high bank of trees beyond the garden, longer than she was quite aware of. Mr. Pierrepont broke into her reverie at last.

“You are admiring my favourite prospect,” he said ; “I am very much attached to that particular bank of trees. It is a constant delight to me all through the summer, as long as there is a leaf left. There is such variety in the foliage, such delicious tints and shades of green, I am never tired of looking.”

“But it is less beautiful just now than usual, I should think,” said Margaret, rousing herself to speak with difficulty. “I don’t know whether you have remarked it, but it strikes me that in midsummer, when the spring freshness has died away, and the autumnal tints have not come, there is a harsh uniformity of colouring in the woodlands—a dead, dull green, that is at times almost painful to the eye. I was noticing it as you spoke. The summer has climbed to its height, and is wearying over its work ; feeling spiritless and heavy, as if it had nothing more to hope for. Just as we middle-aged people feel sometimes, tired of life ; but oh ! such a long, long way most likely from the end.”

The last sentence came out almost involuntarily. Margaret would have given anything to have recalled it, when she realized how it sounded.

There was a moment’s pause, and then Mr. Pierrepont bent down lower over the garden seat, and spoke quickly.

“Miss Blake—Margaret—listen to me. I know what you mean. A little while ago that was the way the rest of my life looked to me. I thought all sweetness and brightness had gone out of it for ever. It is not so with me now, and I found out the reason of the change in my feelings only an hour ago. I love you, Margaret. You could make all the years that remain to me beautiful and bright if you would—and for yourself—I would do my best. I would never ask what had saddened you in the past, but I would protect you as far as lies in the power of man from sorrow in the future. We would not pretend to the feelings of the spring-time we have left behind us ; we would be content with the tender, tranquil, autumnal sunshine that may be ours yet. You could give it me ; could my love and care make it for you, Margaret ? Don’t refuse in haste, if you think it possibly could.”

He added the last sentence hurriedly, because of a sudden

movement Margaret made—a start, almost a recoil, from him to the farthest corner of the seat on which she was reclining.

When he ceased speaking, she covered her face with her hands. Mr. Pierrepont could only judge of the agitation she felt by the trembling of the slender finger-tips that touched her hair; but a sharp struggle went on in her mind during the moment her face was hidden. Could it possibly be? Could it possibly be? A month ago she would not have believed that such words would have had power to raise a storm in her; that the necessity of turning away from a home of her own, and the offer of protection and love for *herself* would have cost her anything; that she could have felt tempted to cling selfishly to a friendly hand stretched out to her. A time would come when she would want the help and protection sorely enough, but had she any right to take it?

She had shut out the light and the sunny flower garden from her eyes when she began to think; but a faint green radiance stole through her fingers and dazzled her still, and soft summer airs full of the fragrance of July roses and lilies clung round her, and seemed to woo her to take pity on herself. The fragrance of the white belladonna lilies, which were in full flower in the Rectory garden that day, always afterwards recalled to Margaret the struggle she then went through, and the final words conscience spoke clearly, "Not for me, not for me."

After all it was hardly a minute before she took down her hands, and glanced up into Mr. Pierrepont's face. He was watching her very anxiously, and as her eyes met his she seemed to take the measure of him, and read him down to the core of his heart.

A kind, sympathetic, impulsive man, conscientious too, and trustworthy, fit enough to make a woman happy under ordinary circumstances, but not the sort of person to bear up under such a burden as any one must take who would share Margaret's inner life—not strong enough, too much bound by the opinion of his own little world.

Margaret could not help a smile dawning on her face, when she saw with what breathless eagerness he was waiting for a favourable answer, and reflected how little he knew what it was he was wishing for.

She held out her hand as she spoke, and there was a queenly sort of pity expressed in the gesture, which might well have puzzled any one who had not followed the course of her thoughts.

"I don't mean this for 'yes,'" she said, smiling, "only to thank you for your kind feeling towards me. You have made a mistake, and I am glad to know it has only been the thought of the last hour. I should not bring sunshine into your life; I should bring a deeper shadow than has ever fallen on you yet. If you knew more about me, you would understand why I say this. After to-day we shall probably not see so much of each other as we have done lately; but if you ever think again of what has passed this afternoon, be glad and not sorry that it has not influenced your life."

Mr. Pierrepont did not take Margaret's offered hand. A very bitter revulsion of feeling came over him while she was speaking. Her steady look up into his face, her smile, the quiet tone in which she had spoken, all stung him more perhaps than any other manner of refusal would have done.

He had a sense—he could hardly account for it, but there it was—of having been weighed in the balance and found wanting. No thought could have been more bitter to a man who lived in other people's opinion as he did. He believed that Margaret had disdained him; and his love for her, which after all had only come into conscious existence a few hours before, died in the light of her smile; her contemptuous smile, as he read it. He was too good a man to allow hatred or any other evil passion to take the place of the suddenly extinguished preference; but there remained deeply rooted in his mind a feeling of impatience at the thought of Margaret, and a dislike to everything that recalled his discomfiture, which influenced his conduct in after-times more than he was himself aware of.

Margaret withdrew her hand when she saw he did not mean to take it, and an embarrassing silence followed. Mr. Pierrepont stood upright behind the garden seat, looking on the ground, and Margaret turned her head towards the door to watch for the signal of release.

It was an equal relief to both when the children ran up to say the carriage had come. Elsie carried a little white rabbit in her arms, and her face was flushed with delight.

"Aunt Margaret, look what Steenie has given me! His prettiest lop-eared rabbit; and he is coming to-morrow to build a house for it in our garden. Oh, I am so happy! Do look at it, Aunt Margaret!"

Aunt Margaret put out her hand, lifted the little creature by its long ears from Elsie's arms, and returned it to Steenie.

"I am sorry, Elsie," she said, "very sorry, but you cannot take that rabbit home. You must let Steenie have it back again; I cannot allow you to take it from him."

Elsie's face became an image of dismay.

"O Aunt Margaret, Aunt Margaret, do you really mean that? But he gave it to me;" and a sudden shower of tears burst forth.

Elsie did not often cry; but this conduct of Margaret's seemed such wanton cruelty, she could not understand it. Steenie looked at her compassionately for a minute, and then walked round to the other side of the garden seat, and touched his father's arm.

"Do you see?" he said. "Papa, ask Miss Blake to let Elsie have the rabbit. She will listen if you ask her."

"You greatly overrate my influence, my boy," Mr. Pierrepont said, smiling rather bitterly. "I am sorry for you. You did a kind thing in offering your pet rabbit to your little play-fellow; but you must be prepared to have your attempts at kindness ill received and disdained sometimes. It is a lesson we must all expect to have to learn sooner or later. Miss Blake, I am afraid I must ask you to accept my arm to walk to the carriage; it is but a step."

Margaret rose and took the offered arm without a word. She was obliged to lean rather heavily upon it, for she was in great pain, and she found that the careful support and help she needed were given to her; but though she glanced once or twice into her companion's face, as she moved along slowly by his side down the gravel walk, she never got the answering farewell look, of which she would have been glad.

It took some time to place Margaret in the carriage, and Elsie dried her eyes just before they started, that she might get one last look through the open door into the Rectory garden.

Steenie and Cecil had carried the little white rabbit back to the grass plot, and begun to play with it again, just as they had all three been playing a few minutes before. The golden afternoon sun shone full on the grass, and on all the waving white lilies and deep coloured July roses in the garden beds behind.

It looked like a little bit of paradise to Elsie, and somehow she knew by Margaret's face that she should never be allowed to enter it again.

When the garden door closed, and there was nothing to look at but the hot stony streets, she was disposed to burst out again into a passion of tears. But Margaret drew her into her arms, and bent her face over her, and Elsie felt one large tear after another fall on her cheek from Margaret's eyes. She lay still, hushed and frightened, her childish anger and sense of cruel wrong thrust aside by a dim perception of a deeper sorrow than her own near her.

CHAPTER IX.

MISS BERRY HAS A SECRET.

LADY SELINA and Cecil took their departure from Oldbury on the day following the events recorded in our last chapter, and the town's people had the satisfaction of seeing the old routine of life, which her coming had invaded, re-established at the Rectory.

Mr. Pierrepont spent as much time in his study, and was as seldom seen half a mile beyond the precincts of his parish, as formerly. The hollyhocks and spicy clove carnations and great Malmaison roses in the Rectory garden died out one after the other, and hung their withered heads forlornly on their stalks, without any one taking the trouble to cut them off, just as they had done every summer since Mrs. Pierrepont died; and about the house itself there was no sign of preparation, not so much as a fresh coat of paint given to the sun-blistered garden door, to suggest to the busiest head in Oldbury that its master had a motive for putting the best face on his dwelling. Of course, everybody talked a great deal about this, only a little less than they would have talked if measures of renovation had actually been set on foot in the old house.

Close observers, comparing notes during long morning calls, could not but come to the conclusion that a very abrupt termination had been put to the intimacy all Oldbury had watched and speculated about during the summer.

It became quite certain at last that a week, a fortnight, a whole month had passed without Mr. Pierrepont's having once walked up the hill as far as the Blakes' house, towards which his steps had so invariably tended a few weeks ago.

Mrs. Lutridge professed not to feel the smallest curiosity

about the matter, and would not allow conjectures to be uttered in her presence. She knew what had taken place, she said, as well as if she had stood between Mr. Pierrepont and Margaret during every one of their interviews, and heard all they said to each other. The history of their intimacy and rupture was only too plain to her. Miss Blake had had a design on Mr. Pierrepont ever since she first came to Oldbury; nobody could deny that her efforts this summer had been desperate indeed. Her want of delicacy had at length opened Mr. Pierrepont's eyes to her designing character, and he was now, very properly, manifesting his displeasure, by withdrawing his countenance from her and her family.

Mrs. Lutridge could only hope that the lesson would not be lost on other young ladies she could name, and that the culprit herself would feel the disapproval of her fellow-townswomen in a becoming manner.

When the invigorating autumnal weather set in, Margaret's strength was so far restored that she was able to resume her walks down the hill to church, and was occasionally to be met on the roads near the town, hand in hand with Elsie.

More than one of the tract committee ladies had the satisfaction of witnessing a rencontre in the streets between her and Mr. Pierrepont. It was an agitating moment for the observers, who were naturally very much afraid of missing anything that was to be seen; but the principals conducted themselves with perfect coolness. Mr. Pierrepont lifted his hat perhaps the eighth part of an inch higher for Margaret than he would have done for any other lady in the town, just as had been observed before, and Margaret bent her beautiful head gravely; and then they had passed each other, and the keenest eyed bystander had nothing further to say about their meeting.

Only Elsie could have told how tightly Margaret's hand closed over hers when Mr. Pierrepont first came in sight, and how she raised her handkerchief to her lips after he had passed to hide even from her eyes that they were trembling a little.

All the time this gossip about Margaret circulated in the town,—and it lasted quite through the autumn, till the appearance of the winter bonnets and mantles in the shop windows gave a new turn to thought in Oldbury,—the person who really suffered from its prevalence was Miss Berry. Her misery in listening to it was not caused chiefly by the certainty she had that Mrs. Lutridge held her partially responsible for the scandal, on account of her officiousness in procuring the loan of

the Bath chair ; she was troubled by a question of duty, which perplexed her mind every time Miss Blake's conduct was commented upon in her presence.

She found herself in the peculiar position of being the one person in Oldbury, besides Margaret and Mr. Pierrepont, who really did know what had passed between them, and she could not make up her mind whether she should be doing them the truest kindness by concealing her information, or by making it public.

It was the most embarrassing event that had ever occurred to her in her whole life ; and sometimes, when she was sitting alone in her own little room, she grew so agitated, going over all the little circumstances that had brought the knowledge to her, that she was obliged to put her work down and walk about the room to quiet herself.

To think of Mr. Pierrepont having told *her* something about himself that nobody else in Oldbury knew ! It was almost awful, but at the same time it was so interesting, and gave her so much to think about, that she could not help being glad it had happened.

The first link in the chain of events that led to so important a result was her having taken upon herself to call at the Blakes on the day Lady Selina left the town, just to let dear little Elsie know that her young friend had borne the pain of quitting Oldbury better than might have been expected.

She sat chatting with Mrs. Blake till late in the afternoon, and just as she was taking leave the study door opened, and Margaret and Mr. Blake came out together. Mr. Blake hastily shuffled back into his sanctuary when he caught sight of Miss Berry standing in the drawing-room doorway, but Margaret came forward, moving slowly across the hall with the feeble step that took something from her stateliness at that time, and made her a more approachable person in Miss Berry's estimation.

She had a book in her hand, and instead of passing into the room she waited, supporting herself against the door-post, till Mrs. Blake concluded some last words. All at once it flashed into Miss Berry's mind to remark what a singularly beautiful person Margaret Blake was, after all. The Oldbury ladies had spoken disparagingly of her beauty one to another ; but just now, looking up at her as she stood, it was very difficult not to acknowledge how striking it was.

The effort of moving across the hall had brought a lovely

flush to her cheeks ; her lips were parted, and trembled as if with some words she was eager to get said ; her large dark eyes had a softening dew over them, which made them look tender and wistful beneath their thick silky lashes, and exquisitely curved black brows.

The handsome features were familiar enough—yet this was a new sight. It was the perfect lifeless statue changing into a tender, suffering, and loving woman under her eyes. If Miss Berry had been a classical scholar, she might have been reminded of Pygmalion ; as it was, she thought of Mr. Pierrepont ; and acknowledged suddenly to herself that his admiration for Margaret Blake was not such an utterly incomprehensible infatuation, as the Oldbury ladies had been accustomed to call it.

“ I am going to ask you to do me a kindness,” Margaret began as soon as Mrs. Blake’s sentence was ended. “ You have frequent opportunities of seeing Mr. Pierrepont, will you return this book into his own hands ? It is one for which he has a special value, and I do not like to send it to the house by a servant for fear it should be mislaid. I shall be easy if you undertake to deliver it.”

“ But, my dear Miss Blake,” Miss Berry interposed, too much taken aback by the contradiction this speech gave to her thoughts to conceal her surprise ; “ my dear Miss Blake—anything I can do, I am sure—but Mr. Pierrepont—I cannot claim anything like the intimacy—an old and deeply indebted friend no doubt I consider myself, and always on the pleasantest of terms—but with you—though I don’t pretend to know anything about gentlemen under these circumstances, I am nearly sure he would prefer your giving him back the book yourself when he comes here again.”

Margaret drew herself up from her reclining posture to her stateliest height. “ I am not likely to see Mr. Pierrepont again at present,” she said coldly ; “ and as he will probably want this book—it is a manuscript book, you see—you will be really doing him a kindness by undertaking my commission.”

She placed the volume in Miss Berry’s hand, and moved on into the room as if there was no more to be said. Miss Berry turned to Mrs. Blake for an explanation, and discovered by the lengthening of the old lady’s kind face, that she too had been disagreeably surprised by what she had just heard. She gazed wistfully and sadly after her daughter, as she threw herself down into an arm-chair by the open window, and leaned her

head back with closed eyes ; and Miss Berry fancied she read a great deal in the mother's look.

While she walked down the hill to her own home, she meditated on the little scene till the right explanation of it grew quite clear to her mind.

There had been a quarrel between Mr. Pierrepont and Margaret—a lover's quarrel. Mrs. Blake, knowing the true state of her daughter's heart, was grieved to hear that they were not likely soon to meet again. Miss Berry did not pretend to much experience herself, and she never read novels, but she was fully penetrated with the popular opinion that lovers, even when, like Margaret and Mr. Pierrepont, they did not happen to be quite young lovers, must go through a certain amount of misunderstandings and mutual tormentings before their courtship could come to a satisfactory termination. She remembered long ago having transcribed in her copy book that the "quarrels of lovers were the renewing of love."

But then, Miss Blake did look so very resolute, and Mr. Pierrepont was not just the man to get over a rebuff, or slight, all at once. A man of his consequence, so accustomed to be looked up to by every one in the town, could not be expected to be very placable, even when he was in love.

Miss Berry grew quite excited, and her heart beat very quickly, as she walked down the hill. Taking this book back to Mr. Pierrepont appeared to her quite a serious matter. The happiness of two people's lives might depend on the way in which she acquitted herself of the task. A very judicious person, or one who had had the experience of Mrs. Lutridge for example, would probably be able to put in some little conciliatory word that might change the whole aspect of affairs.

Miss Berry wondered whether it would be given to her to say anything when the right moment came. She felt very solemn and nervous, as she mounted the Rectory steps, and gave her timid knock at the door.

The lamp was already lighted in the study, but Mr. Pierrepont was only pacing up and down the dark end of the long low room when Miss Berry entered.

While he came forward to meet her, she sent a rapid glance round, which brought the characteristic aspect of the place vividly before her: the hopeless accumulation of dust on the ornamental knick-knacks which had been introduced into the study to give it a cheerful air in Mrs. Pierrepont's time ; the narrow track in the carpet worn threadbare by the restless

pacing up and down of a single pair of feet ; the ink-stains on the cover of the loaded centre table, where just one corner had been hastily cleared for the tea-tray, with its two cups, and untidily cut plate of bread and butter. Steenie was keeping his father waiting for tea as usual, and it was not a sufficiently inviting meal to make any one impatient to sit down to it.

"To be sure," Miss Berry reflected, "what helpless creatures men are when they are left to themselves ; a single woman can manage to live in tolerable comfort, but a single man !—And those good-for-nothing servants at the Rectory *do* so want the eye of a strict mistress over them. Yes, it would be a pity to let the opportunity slip."

By this time Mr. Pierrepont had come within the circle of the lamp-light, and was holding out his hand. "You wish to speak to me. Pray take a seat. I trust there is nothing wrong in your district ; no case of serious illness you have come to tell me of."

It never occurred to him that she could possibly have anything to say personally interesting to him. Miss Berry felt dreadfully embarrassed in opening her mission.

"I—I have not been into my district this afternoon. I have been up the hill to call on the Blakes."

"Indeed !" There was an icy chilliness in the tone ; but to set against that, Miss Berry did not fail to observe that Mr. Pierrepont started at the mention of the Blakes' name, and that the colour rushed rapidly into his face, which had struck her as somewhat paler than usual when she entered the room. He had very little command of countenance ; he was at the mercy of any one who chose to study him.

Miss Berry was too considerate and reverential to give more than one rapid glance, and then she hurried on—

"Yes, I have been up the hill to the Blakes' this afternoon ; just a little neighbourly visit of inquiry, you understand. They are not well any of them, and it struck me that Miss Margaret in particular looked a good deal out of spirits. It may be the weather—most likely it is the weather that affects her, but——"

Mr. Pierrepont leaned over the table to turn down the lamp, which flared uncomfortably in his eyes ; and as Miss Berry could not talk to him while his back was turned, and did not know how to take up the thread of her sentence when he faced her again, there was a long pause. Mr. Pierrepont broke it.

"You did not come here to tell me that Miss Blake was out of spirits, I suppose ?" he asked gently, but with the touch of

sarcasm in tone and manner which was his only weapon of defence in moments of extreme provocation. Miss Berry was pushed to the last degree of nervous incoherence.

"I said I should feel intrusive," she exclaimed almost tearfully; "and I do. I was as sorry as a person could possibly be, when Miss Blake insisted on my bringing back this book to you. 'I am certain Mr. Pierrepont would prefer,' I remonstrated; but there was no manner of use in my speaking, and if I did remark to myself that Miss Blake looked disappointed when she spoke of not seeing you again soon, it was, I assure you, quite without any impertinent intention—I might have been more guarded perhaps, but when one's feelings are concerned——"

Mr. Pierrepont put out his hand to receive the volume Miss Berry tendered to him; then perceiving that no end to her sentence was likely to come, he said deliberately, "I should wish to know exactly what took place. When you speak of disappointment, do you allude to any remark intended for my ears? Had you any message to deliver to me with this book?"

"No," said Miss Berry reluctantly; "there was not anything that could be precisely called a message, but Miss Blake spoke of not seeing you again. Oh, dear! I know I am very wrong. I have no right to say a word, or interfere in any way;—but such an old friend! and having yours and Steenie's interests so at heart! and the room and everything looking so forlorn!—if there is anything I can do, dear Mr. Pierrepont, I am sure you comprehend—if there has been any little misunderstanding that a mutual friend might clear up; any little, if I may use the phrase, friendly quarrel, you know, that only wants a word of explanation to set it right."

More vividly than before the colour flew to Mr. Pierrepont's face, and his fingers grew white with the energy with which they closed over the book he was holding.

Miss Berry stood panting with excitement for a full minute after she had fluttered to the end of her sentence, before he could command his voice; and when he spoke there was more passion in his tone than any one in Oldbury had ever heard in it before. "I am not in the habit of quarrelling with my parishioners," he said. "You misunderstand this matter entirely. Nothing has passed between myself and Miss Blake that requires explanation or interference of any kind. If I can at any time be of use to her, as the clergyman of her parish,

I shall be as ready to serve her as any other member of my congregation; otherwise I must beg you not again to couple our names together."

Mr. Pierrepont turned away as he finished this speech, and began to pace up and down the room in great excitement, and all sorts of terrible thoughts rushed through Miss Berry's brain. What had Margaret Blake done? What could Mr. Pierrepont have found out about her, to make him speak so severely and look so angry? What an inexcusable liberty this mistimed attempt of hers proved to be. She should never be able to hold up her head again. She wished she could sink through the floor, or escape by the window, without having to say good-bye.

When Mr. Pierrepont came up to her again, he was struck by the perplexed, awe-struck expression on her face, and his vexation on his own account was checked by a sudden compunctious thought for Margaret.

He remembered that Miss Berry was the only friend she had in the busy, gossiping, uncharitable little town. His rupture with the Blakes would set innumerable tongues wagging against her, and she would certainly never take the trouble to defend herself against any scandal, however monstrous. It was only right there should be some one in possession of the true state of the case who could speak in her defence if necessary.

It was a very unwelcome conviction to him. He paced back into the dark part of the room to try to reason it away. Hardly anything could have galled him more than to feel obliged to open out such a passage in his life as his rejection by Margaret Blake to such an auditor as Miss Berry. Every sensitive nerve in his body winced, as he imagined to himself how the story would sound when it re-issued from her lips, interlarded with exaggerated expressions of pity and wonder. He told himself that within twenty-four hours after he had spoken, the whole history, and her comments on it, would be affording amusement to every one in Oldbury.

It was a hard struggle, but there was much generosity in his character not as yet extinguished by the adulation to which he had been exposed in Oldbury; and when he had completed a second turn down the room, and come back to the spot where Miss Berry stood, his resolution was taken.

"Miss Berry," he began, "I must not allow you to carry away a false impression from anything I have said to-day. You are a friend of Miss Blake's. It will gratify you to know

that, though I shall probably see little of her in future, nothing has occurred to lessen in the slightest degree my esteem and admiration for her character. The case is quite simple; it may be well that you should understand it. I have made Miss Blake an offer of marriage, and she has refused me."

Mr. Pierrepont drew up his head, and stood very upright and tall before Miss Berry as he spoke, but his face was all glowing and trembling with the effort and emotion it cost him to speak, and a suspicious moisture gathered in his eyes. In recalling the scene afterwards, Miss Berry could never make out, to her own satisfaction, whether it was very humble or very proud he had looked. She only knew there was something in his face, the remembrance of which she was sorry to think she must always keep to herself; it did her so much more good than any of his Sunday sermons. She never had a clear idea what answer she made, or how she got out of the room. She had an impression that Mr. Pierrepont marched to the front door and set it open, before she had recovered her astonishment enough to frame a coherent sentence, and that she had passed into the street with nothing but a curtsy by way of farewell.

It was foolish, when there was so much that might have been said, and when, with a little presence of mind, she might at least have ascertained whether Mr. Pierrepont wished the communication he had made to her to be kept secret or published abroad. Few people who knew Miss Berry would have given her credit for strength of mind to resolve on secrecy, and maintain it as she did all through the autumn. She had some qualms of conscience whenever she heard Margaret spoken against, but she was tolerably well convinced that her accusers would not really be mollified towards her if the truth were made known, and that she was serving her best by keeping her own counsel. Margaret Blake, defeated in her hopes, and forsaken by her admirer, might come in time to be forgiven, and regarded by her neighbours with a certain sort of kindness; but Margaret Blake beloved, and yet scorning the lot other people coveted, was an object that Oldbury could not be expected to regard with any degree of tolerance.

In the lengthening autumn evenings, Miss Berry did a great deal of gentle moralizing on the strange freaks of fate as she sat by her window and watched the reflection of Mr. Pierrepont's figure crossing and recrossing the blind in the house opposite. She thought of that patch in the study carpet which must be

getting more and more threadbare every day, and of the dust on the ornaments, and of the general misdoings of the Rectory servants, and then pictured how different it all might have been by this time if only Margaret Blake had been like other Oldbury young ladies, or if Mr. Pierrepont had had the good fortune to fix his affections in one of the many quarters where they would have been properly appreciated. Dear ! dear ! dear ! and the lonely years of people's lives slipped by all the same as if they were happy. Two, who might have been one, but for some unspoken word or misunderstood gesture, wore out their solitary hours apart, year after year, and had no beautiful history of mutual help and perfected destinies to carry away with them when the end came. Well, it was a comfort to know that all was ordered, and that there was a sufficient reason for everything that happened, if one did but know it.

Miss Berry roused herself to ring for candles when she reached this conclusion, and detained the little maid who brought them for an hour's instruction in Scripture history and geography, illustrated by the map.

It would not do to let oneself grow melancholy, she said to herself ; and in counting up Joshua's battles, and telling over the deeds of lion-hearted men of old times who slew lions in pits, and rent bears and wolves asunder, Miss Berry escaped from Oldbury cares for awhile, and went to bed happy, with a little glow of enthusiasm in her mind, which lifted her to a greater height above the Oldbury atmosphere than her neighbours for the most part ever succeeded in attaining.

CHAPTER X.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

CHRISTMAS passed before Oldbury had anything fresh to excite itself about, and then in the sharp, short January days, when the country was looking its worst, Sir Cecil Russell came to pay a visit at the Rectory, bringing his little daughter with him.

He slipped into the place so quietly, and looked so unimportant, that it was only gradually in the course of a day or two that Oldbury awoke to the importance of the event that had occurred.

Sir Cecil Russel, the great traveller, about whose explorations in the far East so much had been written and conjectured ; who had had the honour (so it was affirmed) of being questioned about his adventures by the Queen herself ; to think of his having been four days in Oldbury without any one discovering who he was, or paying him any special attention !

Mrs. Lutridge was aghast. She wished it to be generally understood, however, that she did not feel herself in any degree to blame. What can the ladies of a place do, she expostulated, when the gentlemen are so taciturn, and so remiss in imparting news to their wives when they come in of an evening, as some people she could name ? And now for Mr. Lutridge and his friends to be talking of giving one of their odious public dinners to Sir Cecil ! where the ladies were to be thrust into a gallery apart, and compelled to listen in silence to their husbands' speeches, as if any fair idea of the intelligence of Oldbury could be given to Sir Cecil by such a proceeding. She herself proposed a decorated tea in the girls' school room, at the close of which Sir Cecil might be requested to give an account of his travels, with such information about the Lost Tribes as he must, doubt-

less, have gathered during his sojourn in Scripture lands. Understanding the subject thoroughly herself, she should have no objection to cross-question him and draw out his views.

How Sir Cecil managed to escape both the dinner and the tea, without turning all the inhabitants of Oldbury, male and female, into deadly enemies, Mr. Pierrepont never was able to understand. There was a very marked contrast in appearance and in character between the brothers-in-law. Sir Cecil was short and dark, like all the Russels, as Lady Selina was fond of saying, a brisk, alert, little man, whose keen eyes seemed to see everything. He explored Oldbury and its neighbourhood as if it had been Central Asia; and by the end of the first week had had long conversations with most of the town's people; and knew more about their circumstances and understood their characters better than Mr. Pierrepont had contrived to do after living among them fifteen years.

While Sir Cecil remained at the Rectory, Miss Berry was in no danger of being depressed with sad thoughts about her opposite neighbour. When the wind blew in a certain quarter, and obliged her to open her window to keep her fire from smoking, she could hear sounds of laughter,—quite boisterous, boyish laughter,—coming across the street.

Certainly, she reflected, men get over their love troubles more easily than women. It is hardly worth while to pity them much. So long as they have companionship it does not much matter to them whether it is one person's or another's.

It was not sentimental, but it was cheerful; and Miss Berry got many pleasant dissolving views of what went on in the opposite house during the short dark days of Sir Cecil's visit.

People who had not such vantage ground for observation contented themselves with admiring Sir Cecil's kindness of heart, as evinced by the care he took of his little dark-eyed daughter, and by the close intimacy and affection that seemed to subsist between the pair.

It was a wonderful sight, they said, to see the little maiden walking up the aisle on Sundays, between her father and her uncle, with that air of ownership in them both she put on, and then to observe the soft look that came over Sir Cecil's face as he lifted her on a hassock and smoothed her blown hair from her face with dexterous fingers like a woman's, and to notice afterwards how he kept her little brown hand close clasped in his throughout all the service.

No one in all Oldbury, however, thought as much of Sir Cecil,

or envied his little daughter the possession of such a father, as did Elsie Blake. She had not thought much of fathers hitherto; she had fancied them either fat, red faced, and gruff voiced, like old Mr. Adams, who frightened her by chucking her under the chin when he met her in the streets; or thin, grave, and bald headed, like Mr. Lutridge, who walked behind the rest of his family into church, carrying the prayer books, and never seemed to be much regarded by any one.

When she had seen Sir Cecil she changed her mind, and resolved that, in all the stories she invented for the future, the children should have fathers who should look at them as Sir Cecil looked at his child, and mothers with light curls, and precisely the same laughing eyes she had seen in the picture Crawford had shown her.

Once or twice, just as she was dropping to sleep, she fancied that a figure, taller and handsomer than Sir Cecil's, but with the same kind face, came to the side of her bed, and looked fondly at her, and when she jumped up wide awake, and saw only the white bed curtains, and the night light on the table showing dimly the doors of the cupboard opposite where the picture was, she wondered whether there might not be on the same shelf another portrait wearing just the fatherly look she had seen in her dream. Crawford had not chosen to say anything about that other picture; but it might be there, and the person it represented might not be dead. Why should he be dead? Cecil's father had been away a long, long time, and had come back. Why should not a father come back to her, and make all her beautiful dream stories true? So Elsie argued with herself till she dropped asleep again.

One day Elsie and Margaret met the Rectory party walking by the river, about a quarter of a mile from the town. The path was too narrow for either group to slip by without fairly confronting the other.

Cecil, who was perched on her father's shoulder, looked down with a little patronizing nod and smile to Elsie.

"See, I have got my father now," her look said; "I don't care for any one else. Don't you envy me?" and Elsie's speaking face grew red and wistful as she glanced upwards, and did not smile in answer to her former playfellow's greeting. She felt somehow that there was a great, an immense distance between herself walking on the path by Margaret, and Cecil perched on her father's shoulder.

Sir Cecil's quick eyes read the pitiful entreaty in Elsie's face, though he did not quite understand what it meant.

"There," he said good-naturedly, "that pretty little girl looks as if she wanted to speak to you. Go and shake hands with her."

An awkward pause of a minute followed. The two little girls held each other's hands in shy silence; and Mr. Pierrepont, after clearing his voice twice, addressed some commonplace remarks to Margaret about the seasonableness of the weather, and the long continuance of the frost.

Sir Cecil heard the constrained tones with wonder; and though, after a quick glance at Margaret, he turned to the children again, he could not help listening curiously for her reply. The clear low tones struck agreeably on his ear. He must look once again. Could that be an Oldbury lady? Why had he not heard a great deal about her before?

Margaret's reply was spoken with more composure than had been Mr. Pierrepont's question, but Sir Cecil detected something in her tone and manner that showed emotion of some sort.

He smiled to himself as he glanced from one speaker to the other. Was this an incipient romance he was getting a glimpse into, or how was it? Had he been wasting a good deal of sympathy on his friend all this time while he was supposing him to be still dwelling on the old sorrow?

At any rate his curiosity impelled him to make a few leading remarks, when they resumed their walk.

"What a lovely child!" he began. "How Leslie would like to paint her. The mother is very handsome too, but in a different style. Is she a widow? I observed she was in mourning, though not widow's mourning."

"Widow's mourning—Miss Blake," Mr. Pierrepont answered rather confusedly and colouring a little. "Oh, she always wears a dark dress; I did not notice anything particular about it to-day. The child is her niece."

"She is not an Oldbury person, surely?"

"Her family has been living in Oldbury some years."

There was clearly nothing further to be learned from Mr. Pierrepont; but Sir Cecil was not satisfied.

During the two or three days he remained in Oldbury after this *rencontre* he contrived once or twice to introduce Margaret Blake's name while conversing with his acquaintance in the town, and was very speedily put in possession of all that was

known, and a great deal of what was being said and conjectured about her and her family by the ill-natured gossips of the place.

He either attached some importance to Mrs. Lutridge's mysterious innuendoes, or was more disgusted than he had hitherto been by the uncharitable dispositions evinced by his brother-in-law's parishioners, for the effect of his investigation was to make him take leave of his friend with a somewhat anxious heart.

"I wish I could take you away with me to-morrow—you and Steenie," he said on the last evening. "I don't know which of you the place disagrees with most thoroughly. Steenie will be the most unmanageable, conceited little rascal in England if he and Mrs. Lutridge are allowed to pit their wits against each other much longer; and you——"

Sir Cecil put his hand on Mr. Pierrepont's shoulder as he spoke, and smiled the sudden sweet smile that made his thin dark face so pleasant to look at sometimes. "As for you—well, I suppose, since you have chosen to curl yourself up in a hole for fifteen years and never move, it is natural you should not perceive how rusty you are getting, and what a number of weedy crotchets are growing over you, for want of something to rub against. I don't know whether you or Steenie require the friction of your equals most."

"Never mind me," Mr. Pierrepont said, wincing a little. "The mould and the rust you speak of must stay; it is too late—I could not bear the rubbing process. I know so much of myself as that, and am quite convinced, not only that I have become unfit for more active work, but that I am doing my duty here very imperfectly. You would not think me in danger of growing vain, however, if you knew how the flattery bestowed on me by my friends here weighs me down, and oppresses me."

"Of course it does. I can imagine perfectly how it must feel to be standing on a high pedestal, an inch wide, with hundreds of stupid faces staring up. How giddy the head, and cramped the limbs must become in time! Why don't you step down and face your equals?"

"You forget my sacred profession; how can I step down? I am differently situated from you, with different temptations, and different helps and privileges."

"Ah, there it is, the helps and privileges! You have surely a discipline of your own, superiors to obey, and fellow-workers to sympathize with all over the world. Why need you

stand alone, feeling as if Oldbury were the only place in the world, and your church the one spot where truth was spoken ; with all the doctrines coming straight out of your own head ? No wonder you are weighed down with responsibility."

They were approaching a line of thought where they had often disagreed before. Mr. Pierrepont shook his head quickly. "No, no, you shall not plunge me into a theological discussion to-night. Come back to Steenie : I really do want your advice there."

He proceeded to relate some escapades of his son's, at which Sir Cecil would only laugh heartily, but the result of the conversation was that Sir Cecil carried a point he had long had in view, and Steenie was made supremely happy the next morning by being told he had taken leave of the Oldbury Grammar School for ever, and was to begin his career at Eton as soon as the Christmas holidays were ended.

CHAPTER XI.

THE SLOW SWEET YEARS THAT BRINGS US ALL THINGS GOOD.

Time passed on, and, as Miss Berry expected, the ill-will of the Oldbury ladies towards Margaret Blake gradually died away.

They forgave her her grand air, and her pink-and-white complexion, and her brilliant eyes, when they were once thoroughly convinced that these advantages were not likely to obtain for her anything they coveted. In spite of them all she was, year by year, slipping down into an unmistakeable old maid as securely as the plainest middle-aged lady in Oldbury; it was really hardly worth while now to make disparaging remarks upon her.

As the brilliant complexion faded, and lines of care deepened on her brow and about her mouth, people began to say it was a pity, and to wonder that such and such an Oldbury gentleman had never thought of marrying Margaret Blake.

She and her father continued to hold themselves aloof from their neighbours, and to look as unlike other people as ever; but, then—"Yes," people began to calculate, "they had actually been living eight, ten, twelve years in Oldbury, and all that time they had walked out at the same hours every day, and passed and repassed other Oldbury people in the streets, and dealt at the same shops, and gone to church regularly every Sunday. They could no longer be looked upon as aliens, and if they were odd and exclusive, had not Oldbury as good a right to have eccentric people living in it as any other town?"

After all has been said that can be said about the disadvantages of living in a narrow, gossip-loving circle of acquaintance, it must be allowed that other feelings besides rancour and ill-

will spring up in the heart from a habit of close observation of one's neighbours. One can't watch a young face fading into a middle-aged one, and know pretty well the nature of the disappointment and cares that are graving the wrinkles on it one by one, without having a certain fellow-feeling for its owner, who is slipping down-hill side by side with ourselves.

On the Sunday when Mrs. Lutridge first found it necessary to use an eye-glass to read the lessons in church, she looked across at old Mrs. Blake fixing her spectacles deliberately on her nose, with a feeling of complacency towards her she had never experienced before.

She felt constrained to stop her as they left the church together, and inquire particularly after her health, and express her hope that Mr. Blake did not find the walk up the hill too much for him this summer.

So it crept on, one little neighbourly attention after another, offered with a genuine good-will, which even Margaret had not the heart altogether to repulse; and when Elsie grew up into even greater beauty than her aunt had possessed on first coming to Oldbury, no over-critical eyes were bent on her to spy out faults, and no disparaging tongues employed themselves in her dispraise.

Her loveliness did not dazzle the Oldbury people's eyes any more than did the beauty of their own river, or the sunsets on their own downs, which strangers made such a fuss about, and which natives took as a matter of course.

Her fellow-townswomen had watched her grow up, and were used to her. They remembered when her golden curls were first gathered up from her neck, and twisted into the shining coils that bound her head now. They had seen the modest maiden shyness grow into the blue eyes that had stared frankly at them from the unconscious child's face. One style of beauty had slid into another before their eyes so gradually that they found nothing to remark upon or find fault with.

Elsie reached her seventeenth birthday, and was almost as tall as Aunt Margaret before it occurred to any one to observe that she was growing up.

The uneventful years that changed her from a child into a woman glided swiftly by with the elder members of the Blake family. Margaret marked their passage with a sort of surprise. The grief that had darkened her life was as ever present with her as in former years; but she had grown accustomed to its

weight, and it no longer hid everything else from her as it had done at first.

When she was reading and writing for her father, her old pleasure in the studies he still unweariedly pursued came back to her almost against her will. She could not help acknowledging that there were things in the world worth living for, that had no connection whatever with her personal loss and sorrow.

When she came out on a summer's evening after a long day's work, and paced up and down an avenue of trees at the end of their garden, she often entered into the peaceful spirit of the hour with a fulness of sympathy that surprised herself. She was no longer Margaret Blake, with terrible recollections lying behind her, and sorrowful anticipations stretching out far into the future: she was part of the golden glowing sunset that flooded the fields and the river, part of the musical rustle of the trees rocked backwards and forwards by the soft wind. Escaped from the prison of her own individuality, she could look down on Margaret Blake and Margaret Blake's sad life, and see it merely as one little dark spot in the golden glory—one little dark spot about which neither she nor any one else need concern themselves much. There were plenty of bright successful lives if some failed; plenty of brave workers labouring joyously at their tasks, if here and there one or two fell back, broken and maimed in the struggle. Still the great march went on—God's great ends would be attained without their aid. As Margaret walked up and down in these peaceful moods, it seemed to her as if a great hand were laid over her heart, hushing and regulating its beatings, that had been so wildly rebellious once, and had racked her with such terrible pain.

There was no rebellion now. The calm resignation which became year by year a more and more marked feature of her character was a constant puzzle to her niece Elsie. It was just the mood of mind with which it was least possible for her to sympathize. She could not understand any one's being indifferent about their own personal share of this world's happiness, she had such an ardent longing for joy herself, and such a happy confidence in what the golden future had in store for her.

The years that had passed rapidly with the elder members of her family looked long to her; her thoughts had been so busy in them. She had lived through so many lives with the heroes and heroines of her favourite books—dream lives, which always had the vista behind them of the actual real life which some day Elsie meant to begin to live.

A discovery she made when she was about thirteen gave a certain coherence to her fancies. About twice a year a box of new books arrived at the Blakes' house. It was the only thing from beyond Oldbury that ever came to them, yet no one remarked on its appearance, at least not in Elsie's hearing; and it sometimes remained in the library unopened for days together. On one occasion Elsie chanced to be present when Margaret first raised the lid, and after that she always took care to secure a glance at its contents before they were disturbed. She discovered that the volumes must have been selected by some one well acquainted with the habits of the different members of the family; by some one, too, who was aware of her existence, and took thought of her. There were scientific works for Mr. Blake, volumes of history or poetry directed to Margaret, and occasionally a gaily bound octavo labelled "Little Alice." When this happened Elsie was beside herself with exultation and excitement. "Little Alice," she repeated over and over again, trying to realize herself under that designation. It was a sort of triumph to her to know there was some one in the world to whom she was "Alice," like the beautiful lady of the picture.

She used to take possession of her story books rather fiercely, and hide them away in a drawer from every one's eyes but her own. Margaret, on the contrary, never claimed the books sent to her—she left them about on the drawing-room table for any one to read; yet when Elsie took up a volume in the evening, she had a conviction that Margaret's eye was on her all the time she held it, and that she knew whenever she turned a page.

During one of these readings Elsie came suddenly upon the empty envelope of a letter lying between the leaves of the book she had taken up. The direction was in such a legible handwriting that she read it at the first glance:—"Gilbert Neale, Esq., Sutton Woods, Thorsby, Yorkshire."

Elsie closed the book softly, and replaced it on the table. She was too much surprised and startled to tell any one what she had found; but often afterwards, when she was alone in the drawing-room, she opened the book in the same place, and looked long at the written words, "Sutton Woods, Thorsby." There lived the unknown relative who thought of her as Alice, and loved her for her mother's sake; her Paradise had a locality and a name now. She studied the Ordnance map of Yorkshire till she knew the names of the villages round Thorsby, and the

roads leading to the Hall as well as if she had lived there all her life. Into the house she imagined herself to be always looking through a long aerial telescope, which enabled her to watch the doings and overhear the conversation of the ideal people who inhabited it, and who were to her the cherished companions of every unoccupied hour.

That was the dream side of Elsie's life; but there was another Elsie, a sensible, dexterous fingered maiden, who followed Mrs. Blake about the house, and helped Crawford in the housekeeping, and studied with Aunt Margaret, and longed as vehemently as ever for Oldbury companionship and favour.

In these moods Elsie contrasted herself with the six Miss Lutridges as sorrowfully as she had done in her childhood. She had a fit of despondency whenever Miss Berry's good-nature, or Mrs. Lutridge's love of patronage, procured her a chance of spending an evening in company with the other young ladies of the place, and of contrasting her quaint dress and out-of-the-way knowledge with their fashionable attire and boarding-school accomplishments.

A new generation was rising up in Oldbury now, and no one, not even Mrs. Lutridge, could avoid being influenced by the spirit of innovation that came with it. Miss Berry accommodated herself to circumstances better than most of her contemporaries. She could bear to be contradicted or patronized by young gentlemen and ladies to whom she had given cakes a few years before; but she suffered seriously when Mr. Richard Lutridge and Mr. Stephen Pierrepont, during one of their vacations from Eton, called at her house and had the cruelty to criticize the geography and chronology of the map; and, in the course of conversation about it, to advance statements respecting the age of the world, that actually made her hair stand on end.

She would not allow herself to repeat the offensive remarks to Elsie Blake, who called a quarter of an hour after the lads had left, and found her tearfully fastening a muslin curtain across the wall to which the map was pasted.

"If it was likely to become a snare," she said, "and tempt young people to speak on sacred subjects irreverently, it had better be put out of sight and forgotten altogether."

Elsie went away with a vague idea that some great insult had been offered to her dear old friend, and was so hot in her indignation against Stephen Pierrepont that she turned her head quite another way whenever she met him in the street during all the time he stayed in Oldbury that summer.

"Stupid, ridiculous, ill-tempered little thing!" Steenie called her a dozen times a day in his thoughts, and scolded himself for being such an idiot as to hurry up the street whenever he got a distant glimpse of her figure, just for the sake of finding out whether the absurd, angry, lovely little face would again be turned indignantly away, or whether he might not once more obtain the friendly nod and smile that had hitherto been his greeting when he and Elsie Blake encountered each other in the streets, or met in Miss Berry's little sitting-room, where, during other holidays, they had occasionally exchanged a few shy, stupid, memorable words.

Steenie need not have troubled himself much about Elsie's defection, for he won golden opinions for himself from almost everybody else in Oldbury during the latter part of his Eton career. The ladies who had given themselves so much trouble about him when he was a little child could not help feeling grateful to him for growing up so straight and tall, and being altogether such a favourable specimen of the masculine good looks of the place.

Mrs. Lutridge, to be sure, was not satisfied with these merely outward signs of well-being. She would have liked to probe the heart, and satisfy herself that the young man's views were all they should be; but the rest of Oldbury allowed itself to feel honoured, and to rejoice, without being troubled by any misgivings, when news of the distinctions Stephen won at Cambridge reached the Rectory term after term.

Mr. Pierrepont was a very proud and happy man when he set off on a round of calls on his parishioners, with the newspaper in his pocket where his son's name was printed as the gainer of some fresh distinction. He never went up to the Lutridges' white house at the top of the hill, or turned into the bank on these occasions, and it was well understood in the town why he abstained from so doing.

Richard Lutridge had gone to the same college as Steenie, and a great deal of information respecting his doings reached Oldbury too, but it was not altogether of a satisfactory kind.

Old Mr. Lutridge was sometimes seen now sitting in a very forlorn attitude in his arm-chair in the bank parlour, where he had hitherto appeared so unapproachably prosperous and dignified; and though Mrs. Lutridge braved it out the better of the two, and declared that for her part she assigned very little value to mere outward morality, she aged rapidly during that period, and began to have more numerous and deeper graven wrinkles

about her eyes than the other matrons of her standing in the town.

Stephen Pierrepont spent his long vacations in travel abroad with Sir Cecil Russel's family, but he paid two winter visits to Oldbury, and satisfied tolerably well all the expectations that had been raised about him. He had by this time quite left off looking sulky and injured when his old friends of the tract committee testified their interest in his doings; and, as Mrs. Lutridge was less keen-sighted than she had been in former days, she failed to detect the roguish twinkle in his eyes, and the odd little smiles that went in and out of his mouth while she talked to him, though some people said they were exact counterparts of looks and smiles that had struck her as betokening such melancholy light-mindedness in his poor mother long ago.

Miss Berry's little room was quite a centre of gaiety while young Pierrepont stayed in Oldbury; he came very frequently to visit his old friend, and when this became known in the town, several other people fell into a habit of dropping in upon her in the afternoons, just to see what the handsome young collegian and Miss Berry could possibly find to talk about to each other. On the first of these visits Steenie insisted on taking down the curtain which had hung before Miss Berry's Scripture map ever since he had made the unfortunate remarks which had put its owner out of love with it. As Elsie Blake happened to be spending an afternoon with Miss Berry, and as nothing would serve Steenie but that they two should set to work at once and furbish up the discoloured face of the drawing themselves, a great deal of laughter and merriment resulted from the undertaking. Old Mrs. Bolton rapped on the wall with her crutch to inquire what could be going on in the next house; and Miss Berry grew a little nervous, and observed that she feared, if Mrs. Lutridge were to look in, she would say they were hardly justified in enjoying themselves to such an extent.

It was a relief to her that Steenie's spirits never carried him away quite so far after that first evening. He haunted the little house in the afternoons as long as his vacations lasted, but he did not always seem to have much to say when he came. He would sometimes stand for quite half an hour at the window looking up the street, and hardly speaking a word,—even when the three elder Miss Lutridges had dropped in, and were engaging Miss Berry in very agreeable conversation, in which he might have taken part if he had so pleased.

On the day before he left home for Cambridge, Steenie deferred

his visit till long after the Oldbury hour for paying calls, and strolled in unceremoniously while Miss Berry was musing over her fire after tea. He sat down on the opposite side of the hearth, and did not seem in any hurry to go away. He listened while Miss Berry told him a long story about the slippery walk up the hill to call on the Blakes she had undertaken that afternoon, and he seemed as curious about the inside of the Blakes' house, and as glad to know exactly what they were all doing when she came in, as the most arrant gossip in Oldbury had ever been.

Just at the last, when he had risen to take leave, he made her show him the very leaf of the map she had been drawing when his mother had visited her little room, and stood by her side for the last time in her life; and he persuaded her to describe his mother to him, as she had been accustomed to do long ago.

He did not seem to have forgotten any of the little incidents of the often repeated tale, but he would hear them all over again exactly as Miss Berry used to say them. How gay and happy Mrs. Pierrepont had looked during the one short year of her life in Oldbury; how she used to run across the street to Miss Berry's house without her bonnet, and shake her curls at her, when she remonstrated on her imprudence; how in wishing good-bye that last time, she had laid both her little white hands on Miss Berry's—like little white birds they were, so soft and fluttering—and how she had turned back on the door-step to smile and kiss her hand over and over again.

It was growing quite late before Steenie had heard all he cared to hear, and Miss Berry had to scold him away, she was so afraid his father would grudge her so many hours of his last evening.

When the door had closed behind him she put up her fingers, still tingling with the strong masculine clasp they had undergone, to wipe some tears from her eyes. The gay little face of the long dead bride came up before her out of the darkness of the room, and she had a strange feeling of compunction towards her, as if she had been enjoying a happiness that ought to have been hers.

"What a good son he would have been to that sweet little creature, if she had only lived to see him grow up," she said to herself, "since he makes so much of an old woman like me, just because I knew her, and loved her better than some other people did."

Something of the same sort of feeling was stirring in her

heart, and mixing her exultation with pain, when Elsie called one early spring morning a month or two later, and found her laughing and crying over a letter, and a strip of printed paper that lay spread out on the table before her.

"My dear, I am so very glad it is only you!" she exclaimed, as soon as she caught sight of Elsie's face in the doorway. "When I heard your knock at the door I got my knitting ready in my hand to throw carelessly over my letters, if it should prove to be Mrs. Lutridge, or any other of the leading ladies, who might have thought they had a better right to hear than I have. Not that I approve of concealments, but I can't bear people's feelings to be hurt; and that I should be singled out for such an attention does seem——. The first letter he wrote, he says, after seeing his name at the head of the Cambridge list of classical honours. Do just look! Stephen Deane Pierrepont at the top of the page in large letters; there cannot be the smallest doubt about it. I always knew he would turn out something superior. The way he managed his little knife and fork, when he was two years old, seated in that very chair! I said then, if only his poor mother could have seen him! and I have precisely the same feeling to-day. Do come and look at the paper, my dear, and read the names to me. Magister Stephen Deane Pierrepont, you see it is printed. Is that what we shall have to call him for the future? Dear me! and I bought him his first reading book, 'Joseph and his Brethren,' not so very long ago."

Elsie knelt on a footstool beside Miss Berry's arm-chair, and looked curiously at the names on the honour list; a lovely pink flush came into her cheeks, and her eyes sparkled. To have any visible tokens of the world beyond Oldbury, any glimpse into its struggles and pleasures, was always an excitement for her. To Elsie, every place that was not Oldbury was dream-land, all vague and glorious, with wonderful possibilities; and everything that testified to the reality of the outside world brought her, as it were, face to face with her dreams. She smiled as she glanced down the printed paper, and let her eyes travel slowly up till they rested on the Stephen Deane Pierrepont in capital letters at the top. There they stayed till Miss Berry recalled her thoughts by beginning to speak of the letter she was still turning about in her hand.

"I can't get over his having written first to me," she said. "Such a favour! so thoroughly undeserved. Now—I should like to read this letter to Mrs. Adams and Miss Tomkinson,

and perhaps to one or two other friends, but all the kind expressions are unfortunately so mixed up with jokes and nonsense—and I have observed that dear Mr. Pierrepont is always a little nervous about Steenie's nonsense being repeated in the town. Here is something about a wooden spoon that he says he quite expected to have won for a prize, but the examiners have gone and given it to Mr. Richard Lutridge instead. Steenie seems to think that we good Oldbury people, as he calls us, will be much gratified at having one of our townsmen so distinguished, but I must say it does not seem to me a respectful sort of prize for these Cambridge examiners to have given to an Oldbury young man, and I cannot think that Mr. Richard Lutridge's dear parents will approve of his being so treated."

"It's a shame to puzzle you by writing such nonsense," cried Elsie, lifting up a crimsoning face and flashing eyes from the letter. "You good Oldbury people indeed! He must have grown as odious as Richard Lutridge. I can't bear his making a joke of you."

"My dear, he knows I like it. It has always been so between us. His playful ways do make me a little anxious sometimes; but it is only because I know that so many of the good people of the town think them unbecoming in a clergyman's son, who ought to set an example of seriousness. There's no use in mentioning that to Steenie, however; for if there is one thing he has always set his face against since he could speak plain, it is being made an example of to the town. Mrs. Lutridge will tremble for him when she hears of his success. She will not be able to think of anything but the temptation and snare it may prove to his soul, and will hardly consider it a matter for congratulation. Dear! dear! I hope I shall be enabled to write a judicious letter that will not puff him up. I think I will write at once, before Mrs. Lutridge comes in and says something to damp my spirits."

Elsie volunteered to assist in the composition of the letter, and took pains to keep all unnecessary allusions to Mrs. Lutridge out of it, and to prevent the congratulations and warnings entangling themselves too perplexingly together. It was no business of hers, but she grew eager as the work progressed, and set her heart vehemently on saving her kind old friend from exposing herself to the ridicule of so supercilious a personage as she just then took it into her head to believe that Stephen Pierrepont had become.

"Well, it is shorter than I could have wished," Miss Berry

said as she signed her name; "and I still think I had better have put in that verse about 'He that is down need fear no fall.' However, you shall direct the envelope. It is to go to Sir Cecil Russel's house in Eaton Square. Mr. Pierrepont has gone up to London to-day to meet his son there. I will put the printed paper away in my desk drawer, for perhaps I had better not let Mrs. Adams and the Miss Tomkinsons know about his sending it to me, jealousies are so soon aroused in Oldbury. Yet I think some one else besides just you and me ought to have seen it before it is hidden away. One feels that its coming should have made some one so very glad. How his mother would have looked at it if she had been alive! Some day, I suppose, there will be another person who will care to read his name here; but I shall not be alive most likely to take the paper out of my desk and show it to her."

"Her! What do you mean?" asked Elsie, looking up from the direction of the letter, over which she was lingering with some interest.

"Oh, my dear! It is very silly of an old maid like me to think of such things, but they *do* happen. Some day, I suppose Stephen Pierrepont will fall in love and marry, and his wife will care to hear everything that happened to him before she knew him. To be sure, it may possibly be some one who knows him already, and has read his name in the class list to-day. There is his cousin Cecil, and Sir Reginald Deane, I understand, has two beautiful daughters. Miss Tomkinson cut out and showed me a paragraph from a newspaper about their presentation at Court, and the dresses they wore on that occasion. One can't help conjecturing ———; but, my dear Elsie, what am I thinking of? This is gossip, and, apart from my own scruples respecting idle words, I have promised your Aunt Margaret never to talk about anything of the kind with you. Dear! dear! you must promise me to forget every word I have said immediately, and then no harm will have been done."

Elsie laughed as she promised. She was certainly not in the habit of pondering Miss Berry's sayings. Her own thoughts were generally a great deal more interesting.

To-day, however, as she walked up the street with the letter to Stephen Pierrepont in her hand, and while she dropped it into the post-office, her fancies did not take quite their usual shape. She could not prevent her thoughts from following the letter on its journey. She looked regretfully after it as she let it fall into the letter-box, as if she hardly liked to part with

such a link between herself and the unknown, dazzling, outside world that was not Oldbury.

Who would be near when the letter was opened? Would Cecil Russel take it out of Stephen Pierrepont's hand and laugh over it with him, and would the two gorgeous young lady cousins who had been presented at Court join in the conversation? Oh, how happy people were who could go where they pleased, and see all sorts of splendours; and how hard it was that they should sneer at Oldbury folk for being obliged to stay at home!

As Elsie came in sight of her home she checked herself. What was she doing? She was breaking her promise, and transgressing Aunt Margaret's wishes in dwelling on the images Miss Berry's words had called up.

The reflection caused her a disagreeable twinge of conscience, and made her feel hot and angry as she toiled along the last few paces of her steep walk. But why? but why? she asked herself; why should Aunt Margaret object to her even hearing of things that did really happen to other young people, to actual live people, not merely to people in books? Why was her aunt determined to draw such a hard line round her, and shut her in by herself? Real live people; Elsie dwelt on the thought. She had been very happy in her dream world, she would be very happy in it again, but just now for a moment or two its glory faded from before her eyes. The visionary companions that had satisfied her hitherto looked cold and misty. She began to be, just a very little, "sick of shadows," and to long to turn from the reflections in the magic mirror to the objects themselves. They were certainly there, outside her enchanted island, waiting for her to turn towards them, if Margaret would only let her look.

CHAPTER XII.

A WARNING.

ANOTHER year had passed. Stephen Pierrepoint had gained a fellowship at Trinity the autumn after he had taken his degree, and had spent the succeeding winter in foreign travel with a friend, to whom he was acting as tutor. No date had been mentioned for his return, and the Oldbury people began to say it was quite time he came home again, and to conjecture that his father must feel a little hurt at his keeping away so long.

His London relatives, with whom he had hitherto spent the greater part of his holiday time, did not perhaps trouble themselves so constantly about him. At all events, a little dark-haired young lady, who was very busy copying letters in the back drawing-room of a house in Eaton Square, gave a great start of surprise when a footman came up to her and presented a card, on which was printed, "Stephen D. Pierrepoint, Trinity College, Cambridge." Her eyes—the most remarkable feature of her thin dark face—grew very large and bright, and her mouth, which had been puckered up over her writing, broke into a radiant smile as she looked for a second fixedly at the name.

"Show the gentleman up here immediately," she said. Then, when the servant had left the room to execute her order, she began to collect and arrange the scattered papers on the desk with agitated, fluttering fingers; and long before the visitor had had time to mount the stairs, she ran out on the landing, and stood with outstretched hands and sparkling face to welcome him.

A tall young man sprang quickly up the steps when he

caught sight of her, and their hands met in an eager clasp. "You ridiculous fellow for sending up your card!" were the first words Cecil spoke.

"Well, why should not I? You have a new set of servants. I had positively a difficulty in getting in," was the nonchalant answer.

There was all the extreme pleasure at meeting again which a strongly attached brother and sister might have felt, expressed in the faces of the two speakers, but it was tempered by a bantering playfulness of manner, banishing all sentiment, which would have told a bystander that the relationship between them was of a less close kind.

"Come in here and let me look at you," said Cecil, drawing her cousin into the room she had left.

She retreated a step or two from his side when they had entered, put her two hands behind her, and stood with her head thrown back looking considerably up into his face.

Her own grew grave again all at once, and wore the thoughtful, observing expression, childlike in its perfect freedom from self-consciousness, which was habitual to it in repose, and which gave a sort of quaintness to her look, that made some people say it was impossible to guess Miss Russel's exact age, and others complain that, small and delicately formed as her features were, her face was more like a boy's than a girl's.

Steenie returned her studying glance gravely for a moment or two, but his countenance began to change first. "Come now, what is the verdict?" he asked, laughing, and colouring a little too, even through the sunburn of his cheeks.

"Yes, I think the *Wanderjahre* has done you good," said Cecil; "it has rubbed something of the college rust off. There was undoubtedly a flavour of donnishness coming over you before you went away."

"Much you know about it. You are not the least changed at all events."

"Oh dear, no!" said Cecil; "that's past hoping for. 'So remarkably small and brown.' I shall never be anything else—never anything but a Russel. However, you need not look down so pityingly on me from your height. I am reconciled to my fate. Let the rest of our family be ever so tall—and—conscious of their personal advantages, I don't mean to be brow-beaten and put down by any one of them."

"Decidedly, we are neither of us changed," said Steenie. "I have not been three minutes in the house, and you have begun

to bully me already. You get me into a corner, and won't even let me sit down."

"Decidedly, we are both of us a little changed," said Cecil, pushing an arm-chair towards the window as she spoke. "Some years ago such a speech as that would have been followed by your ordering me to help you to pull off your boots; now you will be satisfied by my setting your lordship's chair, I suppose."

"I don't believe I was ever quite such a brute as to let you wait on me to that extent, even in my worst Oldbury days," said Steenie, sinking slowly into the chair she had pushed towards him, but turning his head so as to look up at her all the time. Then half springing up again—"But I am almost as bad now. Where are you going to sit?"

"Nowhere just now," answered Cecil. "Look at the clock!—Papa's letters! No, sit down again, you can't help me. Only be quiet, and let me forget you are here for the next ten minutes."

She ran back to the desk, seized her pen, and began hastily to direct letters, and make up and seal packages. Her delicately marked brows were knit into a small frown, as she fluttered the leaves of a distractingly full blotting-book backwards and forwards, and her quick fingers got into unwonted puzzles over her tying and sealing.

"No, I can't stand seeing you burn your fingers with the sealing-wax like that," cried Steenie, jumping up and standing over her. "Come, give up the letters to me, and just tell me where they are going."

For the next ten minutes they worked together as if they had shared the same task every day of their lives; Cecil giving directions in a quick, decided tone, and Stephen glancing up from his writing and folding every now and then to smile at her business-like airs. When the letters were ready, he retired to the arm-chair again, and watched her as she flitted about the room: first to the door to give the letter-bag to the servant who was waiting for it; then back to the desk, stooping now to pick up a stray paper, then stretching upon tip-toe to restore a book to the shelf over her head.

Stephen had never been able to make up his mind whether he considered his cousin Cecil pretty or plain, and he was as far as ever from arriving at any conclusion on the subject as his eyes followed her rapid movements that day. Pretty or plain, she was Cecil Russel, with something about her so differ-

ent from anybody else, that even if one were not lazy or tired the temptation to sit still and watch her was not to be resisted.

Quick, restless, glancing ways were hers, and among them never an ungraceful movement, nor a look on the rapidly changing countenance that betrayed a thought about herself.

Her dress was as characteristic as her motions. The soft, black hair was still strained back from the face and tied with ribbons—sober black velvet bands now, but there were fluttering ends falling over her neck in the old fashion; a bright-coloured ribbon round her small brown throat; heavy falling bracelets on her wrists, that seemed as if they must get in the way of any hands less nimble than those they surrounded:—the whole effect a perfection of dexterous daintiness that somehow or other looked as if it would have been disorder on any other figure than hers.

“I believe you are changed after all,” said Steenie as she jumped down from a footstool on which she had mounted to arrange the book-case; “you have grown about a hundred years younger than you were when I went away; you have lost your fairy god-mother look. Is it coming out that has done it, or what?”

“I shall leave it to your philosophic mind to determine cause and effect,” said Cecil. “Don’t expect me to pull myself to pieces for your edification; but here I am ready to sit still and answer any other question.”

“You have been modernizing the room as well as yourself,” observed Steenie, looking round discontentedly; “the old Indian cabinet and all the Japanese dragons are gone to make room for that sofa. I don’t like it.”

“Do you mean to say you don’t know the reason? You must have missed a great many of our letters. Have you really not heard of the new dynasty that came into power when I began to go out? Dear old Miss Palmer, whom you will never have the satisfaction of plaguing again, sent away, and Grandmamma installed in command.”

“Living in this house?” cried Stephen in a comical tone of dismay. “Well, I thought you had grown very thin; but how in the world does my uncle——”

“Steenie,” interrupted Cecil, “do you know I don’t think I ever quite knew *how* good Papa is till lately. It seemed to him a right thing to do to ask Grandmamma to live with us; and now she is here, nothing ever puts him out of temper, or alters his consideration and respect. He listens——”

“What! to all the histories about the Russels being so small and brown? I am glad I came home: I shall at least prove a diversion, and perhaps save you both from dying of superhuman exertions to be respectful. You will have to acknowledge that you have never quite known how good I am when you see the heroism with which I shall throw myself into the breach.”

“No, no, I shall not trust you, and I don’t want to have old nonsense revived; I am really trying to behave well. But how is it that you have come home? The last thing we heard was that you had decided on spending the spring in Syria, and meant to see something of Russia before you came back. Papa approved of the plan, both for you and your pupil, Walter Neale. He will think you very foolish for shortening your holiday.”

“He will be satisfied when he hears our reasons.”

“I hope it is not because you and poor young Neale have *grown tired of each other*,” said Cecil anxiously. “Your kindness to that poor fellow is the one thing I like about you, Steenie, and I shan’t approve of it if you have tired of him and thrown him off.”

“What an extraordinary way of speaking of the connexion between tutor and pupil! for that is how he and I have stood to each other lately. I like him as well as ever I did, and it strikes me that you are quite unnecessarily compassionate. Poor fellow indeed! that’s not the tone in which he would like to hear you speak of him, I can assure you.”

“He is a poor fellow,” said Cecil; “one can’t say anything else about him; and I pity him, because Papa says there are peculiarly sad circumstances in his family history that partly excuse his painful nervousness. It certainly must be the force of contrast that makes him attach himself so vehemently to you. Was he very much cut up at your leaving him?”

“He did not say so,” answered Steenie, laughing. “There was no grief in our parting that need distress your imagination. Besides, he had received a summons home himself. The great event to which his uncle, Gilbert Neale, has been looking forward for years, has taken place at last. Colonel Lloyd is dead; and Connington, the property that formerly belonged to Mrs. Neale, is in the market again. Old Gilbert will purchase it at any price. He is rich enough now, they say; and I believe he means to keep his nephew’s twenty-first birthday in great state there. If they do get down to Connington this summer, I shall see more than enough of them. It is within ten miles of Oldbury, you know.”

"You intend to spend the summer at Oldbury then? Oldbury instead of a tent in a rose garden at Damascus, or a convent on Mount Lebanon. And you don't know yet how you are going to be rewarded for making the exchange."

"Rewarded! You are speaking riddles," said Steenie rather hurriedly.

"Yes, I think you deserve some reward for giving up the rest of your tour for the sake of spending the summer with your father, who is just now very much out of spirits and troubled about these Oldbury quarrels; and I expect you will be overpowered with gratitude when you know what recompense is in store for filial duty. We are going there, Grandmamma and I, to Oldbury for the whole summer. My father expects to be sent to Vienna on public business, and while he is away we are to stay at the Rectory. What do you think of that?"

There was a moment's pause. Cecil sprang from her chair, and stood straight before her cousin, looking down with playful defiance into his face.

"Now, Steenie, take care. It is too late. All the pretty speeches in the world won't do any good now. Keep back the one you are preparing, for I have read your real feelings in your face. You are *not* particularly pleased. It does not fall in with your projects that we should be at the Rectory this year; or else you are thinking that, since we shall be there to keep your father company, you might as well have stayed away and enjoyed yourself."

"No, no; I mean to enjoy myself at Oldbury. I am immensely glad you are going there, of course. If I did not look so, it was merely that I was taken aback by your accrediting me with such elaborately virtuous motives for coming home. They exist only in your imagination, and we are talking at cross purposes."

"I don't believe it. The very same purpose draws us both to Oldbury; but you won't confess it even to yourself. You don't choose to see that Mrs. Lutridge is at the bottom of your being obliged to come home sooner than you had intended."

"That I will swear she is not."

"Yes, she is. She has stretched out her hand into Asia after you, and brought you back against your will. You have been compelled to shorten your tour, and I to give up part of my first London season, because the four Misses Lutridge have taken to attend daily service in the new church, and Mrs. Lutridge, having sagely concluded that all Oldbury is going over to the

Church of Rome in consequence, is trying to drag your father into controversies with the new incumbent, and has made him thoroughly miserable by the party spirit she has roused."

"But what do you suppose I could do in that galley? Do you think I am conceited enough to imagine I can quell a storm in an Oldbury tea-cup, or that my father would care to have me with him if he were ever so miserable?"

"Then what in the world do you come home for?"

"Is it absolutely necessary to have a well digested reason for coming home when one has been wandering about the world for eight months?" said Stephen evasively.

"But I am perfectly certain there is something."

"And I am perfectly certain that there is nothing, but that I was seized with an irresistible desire to get back."

"To Oldbury!" said Cecil, with a note of exclamation in her face.

"Yes, to Oldbury. There, make what you like of it; but don't be too imaginative, I warn you. Anyhow, here I am, and whether I deserve it or not, I appreciate my wonderful luck in having you at the Rectory this year. We shall have a glorious summer, a right down glorious summer, Cecil, in spite of Mrs. Lutridge and all the witch storms she may be brewing. How many years is it since you stayed at the old house?"

Much eager talk followed. Cecil was satisfied of her companion's real pleasure in the prospect before them; but as they continued there conversation, a new anxiety seized her. What would her father think of Steenie's unexpected return? Would it please him, or would it make him regret the consent to her visit to Oldbury she had coaxed him into giving?

As soon as she heard Sir Cecil's knock at the door, she flew down stairs and informed him of her cousin's arrival, and of his projects for the summer, all in a breath.

She noticed, or fancied she noticed, a slight shade of something that was not satisfaction flit across her father's face; but it was so slight, and passed away so quickly, that she did not venture to remark upon it.

By the time Sir Cecil had followed his daughter to the drawing-room the cloud had departed, and Stephen received as warm a welcome from his uncle as he could possibly desire.

It was a brilliantly happy evening to Cecil after that. She enjoyed sitting opposite her father at dinner and watching how the lines of worry passed from his face, and how his eyes woke up and brightened as he cross-questioned Stephen

about his travels, and was skilfully led on by his nephew's answers to bring out recollections of his own days of wandering.

It was pleasant to interpose a word now and then, and to exchange a congratulatory, amused side glance with her cousin when their combined skill had fairly launched her father on one of his favourite topics.

Steenie was the one person in the world with whom Cecil was intimate enough to share her thoughts about her father. It was a decided pleasure to have his sympathy within reach again. They understood each other's full admiration and reverence for Sir Cecil, and could venture to exchange the sort of playful affectionate amusement over his peculiarities and characteristic ways, which is often the strongest evidence of a perfectly sound affection.

Mr. Pierrepont came up to London to meet his son, and consented to remain in Eaton Square till the time fixed for Sir Cecil's departure from England.

Cecil professed a determination to crowd into the last few days as many as possible of the gaieties she was giving. She hunted her uncle and cousin about to fêtes and evening parties, rejoicing mischievously when she had entrapped Mr. Pierrepont into being present at some entertainment about which she and Steenie could exchange glances, and exclaim, "If only dearest Mrs. Lutridge could see him just now!"

On the last evening before their departure for Oldbury, Cecil returned from an evening party quite triumphant, because she had kept her uncle so happily engaged in conversation in an ante-room, that he never became aware of the dancing that was going on in the drawing-room beyond.

While Mr. Pierrepont gave Sir Cecil his account of the evening's amusements, Cecil turned to Stephen, who had not relished being left by her to his own resources, and began to rally him on the morose silence he had maintained during the drive home. Sir Cecil, who was turning over a great bundle of letters that the late post had brought in, managed to send some quick observing glances towards the two young people, as they stood together near the door, and caught a good deal of what they were saying to each other, through the even flow of Mr. Pierrepont's discourse.

"No, it was base conduct on your part," Steenie began; "I shall not laugh. To draw us both to that place on false pretences! You knew perfectly well I should never have gone

if you had not led me to believe that you would dance with me yourself half the evening."

"I!—the idea of my doing such a thing. Besides, you did not want me in the least; you had plenty of better partners. I watched you, and observed how happy you were talking to Selina Deane whenever you thought I was not looking at you."

"She was talking to me; I was nearly drowned in the avalanche of smooth unmeaning words."

"But you admired her. Every one said she looked lovely to-night."

"Such a thorough Deane, so remarkably tall and fair," Steenie laughed; "it is pleasant to see that there are some of the younger generation who have not degenerated in any respect."

"I will forgive your laughter; for I know that at the bottom of your heart you like her immensely. I foresaw you would. She has grown up into just the sort of girl you are sure to be charmed with; one of those stupid beautiful negative women that clever men always adore."

"I don't belong to the class of her adorers, then, I beg to state. Why do you insist on my being charmed? Can't you let me decide that for myself?"

"No, because I understand your real tastes much better than you do yourself at present. I know precisely the manner of woman you will eventually fall in love with. It may not be our dear cousin Selina Deane, but it will be some one of her stamp. I was consulting your inmost inclinations when I left you to the company of the Deanes to-night, and you enjoyed yourself immensely, though you will not own it."

"I hope you don't mean to be as perverse when we get down to Oldbury, and consult my inmost inclinations by leaving me to enjoy Mrs. Lutridge's society."

"I shall not favour your shirking a fair share of it, I can assure you," said Cecil demurely. "It is in order to keep you up to your duty in this and other respects that I am going down to the Rectory.—Now, Uncle, confess, should you not have been terribly afraid of having Stephen at home with you all this long summer, if I were not going too, to smooth out all the tangles he will make among your good Oldbury neighbours? Don't you foresee the misunderstandings, and the clatter and the dust he will raise round him, and the hard work you and I shall have to keep the peace and manage every one?"

"What an odious creature you are making yourself out to be!" cried Steenie. "One would think you aspired to become a second Mrs. Luttridge. Of all things in the world, the most hateful is a managing woman."

"That is your opinion, of course," said Cecil; "I have just been telling you so. You don't like a woman to be clever enough to manage; she must be a meek nonentity to please you, I know that well enough."

She came up to her uncle and slipped her hand through his arm, sending back a triumphant, saucy glance at Stephen's face as she finished speaking; then turned round to her father, and grew sober all at once on perceiving that he had overheard their talk, and that his face wore a slight look of disapprobation very unusually seen there while listening to her.

"Papa, was I talking very great nonsense—worse than usual?" she said, coming and standing before Sir Cecil's chair when the other two had left the room.

"Not worse than usual that I perceived," Sir Cecil answered, smiling.

"What was it, then? Tell me, dear; you *must* tell me this last night what thought you had about me that brought such a grave look into your eyes."

"Shall I?" said Sir Cecil, musing aloud, and looking up consideringly at her. "Would it be wise and good for you to hear it?"

"Yes, yes; all your thoughts are wise, and good for me to hear."

"Well, you are not the kind of girl to fall in love with any one, simply because you have been warned against it."

"I should hope not. But this is the oddest thing for you to say; and, Papa, I don't think I need any warning."

"I may be making a mistake: I am but a clumsy monitor for you; your mother would have known exactly what it was best to say and leave unsaid. Yet I can't let you go from me, to spend a long idle summer almost exclusively in one person's company, without giving you a word of caution."

"Papa!" exclaimed Cecil, suddenly crimsoning up to her forehead. "You don't mean Steenie? Oh, I wish you had not said it or thought it. We have been so happy and at ease together, like brother and sister, and now to have such a thing put into words. It will spoil all my comfort."

"It is because I think you have sense enough not to let it spoil your comfort that I have ventured to speak."

"Yes; but that you should have had even a passing thought of the kind about us—I can't get over it.

"Then I had best tell you exactly what I do think, that you may not be tempted to exaggerate. I know better than you do, that young people, when they are thrown very much together, do talk and laugh and joke themselves into a kind of intimacy and dependence on each other which they often mistake for love. It is just this mistake I am warning you against. I should be sorry if you and Steenie became really attached; for I don't approve of cousins marrying. But it is not an attachment between you I fear; I speak because I know, if you get any fancy of the kind into your heads, it will not be the real thing. It will be a mere sham liking, founded on banter and nonsense, and companionship in idleness, the worst sympathies to found a life-long connexion upon. It may be a romantic notion of mine, but I don't think I could bear to give you up to any one who did not feel for you as I felt for your mother. Till some one comes who can claim you on such good grounds as that, I should like to keep you myself."

"Papa, don't you know," cried Cecil, "that I will never go to any one while you want me? How could I? Who could be as much to me as you? If you will only always want me?"

"No, no, I forbid your making rash resolutions; I don't mean to be selfish. I only wish you to understand what there is for you at home. I could not bear you to be one of those restless, pining women, who are ready to snatch at any poor pretence of an attachment, just because they have no faith in the home love. You must not be like that, my little one, my darling, my one child."

"Papa, how could I?" cried Cecil, throwing her arms round her father's neck. "I am not sorry you spoke now; I will take it as just another proof of how good you are to me; I will be very wise, and careful."

"But not too wise. I don't want to destroy your freedom and lightness of heart. I trust to your good sense not to exaggerate my warning. Be cautious too how you meddle with Oldbury politics. You are not going down as consul-general to settle the affairs of the whole town. You had better not mix yourself up in the good townspeople's little jealousies and squabbles; and, above all, don't encourage Steenie to laugh at them too much. Young people are naturally insolent, and never perceive while they are laughing at others, what embarrassments they may be weaving for themselves. Remember

that the silliest of the Oldbury people who has lived fifty years in the world is probably wiser on many points than you and Steenie put together, geniuses as you consider yourselves."

Sir Cecil was stroking back Cecil's soft hair, and looking down at her as she sat on his knee, with a playful, tender smile, softening all the thoughtful lines of his face.

"O Papa! what will it be—to be away from you, and have no more scoldings the whole summer!" exclaimed Cecil by way of answer.

CHAPTER XIII.

A LONG SUMMER'S DAY IN OLDBURY.

A BRISK sunshiny June day, after a night of thunder-rain, with just enough wind to keep the wet leaves of the trees in all the little gardens behind the Oldbury houses dancing and glancing in the sunshine, and with floating white clouds overhead to dot the distant hillsides with moving shadows, and chequer the bright white street in pleasant alternations of light and shade.

Cecil had been nearly a week in Oldbury, but she had not yet learnt to distrust the seeming quiet of the place, or to understand that there were more eyes watching her unconventional proceedings in the High Street than would have been turned upon her in the most crowded thoroughfare in London, whatever she might have been doing.

On this breezy morning after the rain she was, to Miss Berry's secret dismay, more restless and more forgetful of appearances than usual, just as if the rollicking wind, or the dazzle of the sunshine, had got into her brain and made her beside herself with high spirits. It was quite impossible to help watching her, as she flitted in and out from the garden behind the Rectory, through the hall, out upon the front door-step, leaving all the doors open behind her, as if for the express purpose of affording passers-by a full view of young Stephen Pierrepont stretched lazily on a garden seat with a short pipe in his mouth, and of Mr. Pierrepont walking up and down the lime-walk as tranquilly as if he had forgotten all about Mrs. Lutridge's anti-tobacco society, and did not heed in the least what his son was doing.

She was actually standing in the open doorway, looking out into the street, when Mr. Lutridge passed on his way to the

bank ; and, not at all abashed by his ceremonious greeting, she dashed down the wet steps almost before his eyes, trailing her dainty dress in the gutter, for nothing in the world but to pick up a cauliflower that an old woman had let fall from her basket ; and then she stood still, in the very middle of the road, for several minutes, staring after the scarlet-cloaked market-women, as they passed through sunlight and shadow along the upward sloping street.

She would hardly have remained so tranquil if she had known, as well as Miss Berry did, that the four clerks in Mr. Lutridge's Bank, and the surgeon's assistant, and the young men in the mercer's shop, and the Misses Tomkinsons' twenty young ladies, were all pressing their faces against their window panes, or peering furtively from their doorways, to see what she was about ; and that the whole of the rest of the morning would have for each one of them a certain flavour of interest and unusualness from a lively perception of the oddity of her conduct.

Stephen might have been expected to know better what was due to Oldbury etiquette ; but he did not mend matters much by coming to meet his cousin, as she leisurely approached the house, and keeping her standing talking to him for another five minutes in the doorway.

The six Misses Lutridge, with their six ivory crossed prayer-books in their hands, on their way from one of the numerous services of the new church, passed in this interval ; but Cecil was too much occupied with the inanimate objects round her to be aware of their proximity. She did not notice when Stephen raised his wide-awake hat, in greeting to them, and missed the flash of amusement that came into his eyes when he caught the scandalized glances they directed towards her. She was looking through the house into the garden behind.

"It is the contrast I enjoy so much," she exclaimed. "O Steenie ! do look at that delicious bit of old garden wall now the sun is shining full upon it. The bitter-sweet and the mother-of-millions growing on the top, and the stone-crop sprouting out between the currant leaves, and then those long bunches of red and white currants, solid and perfect, like the jewel fruit Aladdin brought from the lamp-garden. How sleepy and dreamy it all looks !"

"There is a good deal of brisk life going on there, if my eyes serve me right. Can you see that fat thrush standing on tip-toe and shelling peas with his beak ? Decidedly the most wide-awake individual in Oldbury this morning."

"Yes. What a garden it is for birds! What a crowd of them round that white-heart cherry tree, and how their wings glance and shimmer in the sunshine! It is almost a shame to let them have it all to themselves. I shall suggest to Miss Berry to turn in some school children to dispute possession of the currants and cherries with the blackbirds."

"It would be a cruel kindness. Imagine the superhuman industry and fluency in Watts' Catechism that would be expected to result from eating the Rector's cherries. The blackbirds have the best of it; they can regale themselves from my father's trees without being required to set their feathers to Mrs. Lutridge's orders, and offer an example of smugness to their tribe ever afterwards."

"How odd it is to turn from the still garden to the town street, and hear the rumble of carts going up the hill, and the sound of voices. The man crying cherries down there, and the chatter from the group of women round the market-cross. That little bit of life takes me farther away from London bustle than the garden stillness. How is it, Steenie? When I go away from home, I am generally disappointed to find that I have brought my own sky with me; yet here I actually do feel as if I had slipped down into the middle of another person's life. It is strange the much and the little that outside things go to make up one's inside feeling. I wish I could make it out."

"You had better come into the house, then," said Stephen, laughing; "I am not capable of talking Plato in a doorway, with all Oldbury looking on, if you are. I don't think, however, you need trouble yourself about your identity; I can testify that your propensity to plunge into metaphysics at inconvenient times did not come with Oldbury air. It has been a troublesome peculiarity of your inside ever since I have known you."

Stephen started from his recumbent position by the door-post as he finished speaking, and passed into the house rather hastily; but Cecil did not follow him. When she entered the morning-room at last, there was a bright flush on her cheek, and a sparkle of excitement in her eyes, quite different from the thoughtful look they had a few minutes before.

"O Steenie!" she said, "what a pity you went away just then! I wonder you did, for you must have seen them coming down the road. They passed just now, she and her aunt, on this side of the street, and she turned quite round and smiled at me—such a smile! coming from under that prim poke-bonnet. I declare it was worth travelling all the way from London to

see the wonderful illumination it was. I shall speak to her the very next time we meet. I really can't help it any longer. I am certain she remembers me, and I won't be bound by Oldbury rules. I shall claim them as old acquaintances, though they have not chosen to call, like everybody else, since I came here."

"You are admirably perspicuous in your use of pronouns this morning," said Stephen.

He had seated himself at Cecil's easel while she was speaking, and, with an ostentatious display of unconcern, was dabbling her brushes in the water, and preparing to administer a wash to a water-colour sketch that stood upon the easel.

Cecil ran up and peeped over his shoulder to see what he was doing.

"You think I have put too much yellow ochre in my sunset reflections in the water?"

"The reflections are deeper coloured than the sky."

"But so they were."

"Impossible."

"Not in Oldbury, not in that particular reach of the river by the three oaks. Let us go down there again to-night, and if there is a fine sunset you will see what I meant. You may alter my trees if you like. I know they don't stand out properly."

"To go back to what you were saying," remarked Steenie, as he worked diligently; "if you really do wish to begin a speaking acquaintance with her, I advise you to watch for an opportunity when she has gone into Miss Berry's house. I think I have observed that she——"

"Who is admirably perspicuous as to pronouns now?" interrupted Cecil.

"Nonsense, my meaning is quite clear."

"And so was mine, for I knew perfectly well that you had been watching her through the window. I shall just despise you if you pretend that you are not curious and interested about her. She turns the whole town into a fairy tale just by walking about it. I could believe I had dreamed her, till I got that smile of recognition just now; and it was——O Steenie, what are you doing to my sky? you have got your brush full of sap green; you can't be attending to what you are about."

"Well, put it right for yourself; I am regularly wasting my morning; I am going into the library now to read law."

"Yes, I daresay; I will take care not to interrupt your studies as I did the other day, when I found you standing on

the library steps finishing the last number of *Vanity Fair*, with all the others scattered about you."

"I had been looking to see if they were still in my old hiding-place for them, behind the *Church Missionary Magazines*. I suppose you know about Mrs. Lutridge's having ordered *Vanity Fair* into the book-club under an idea that it was a continuation of *Pilgrim's Progress*, and how long it was before she would give up trying to see a religious allegory in it. She wrote to the author to complain of want of clearness, and to suggest improvements."

"What a lucky mistake for the book-club members! How Miss Berry must have revelled in the story!"

"She was ordered to stop at the fifth chapter when Mrs. Lutridge discovered that her letter had not received the attention she expected. After that the numbers never got farther than the Rectory, and when I was not reading them they hid behind the *Church Missionary Magazines*. I had a scheme for shooting them from my bed-room window into Elderberry's back yard, but her tyrannical conscience would not permit her to profit by my cunning, and I am afraid she is secretly uneasy about how Amelia Sedley's marriage turned out to this day."

"Well, Mrs. Lutridge's days of dictatorship are over now. I was really almost sorry for her last night, when her six daughters were putting her down with such a high hand for objecting to the Saint's-day services in the new church. One so dislikes to hear right things advocated in such a wrong temper. I was glad you did not join in the discussion."

"Squabble," corrected Steenie. "There was about as much understanding of what they were talking about on one side as on the other. It was extremely amusing to hear them at it, and I was not the least sorry for Mrs. Lutridge. She deserves to have all her six daughters turn Mormonites or Spirit-Rappers. It is too good luck for her that they have fallen into such good hands, and are doing nothing worse than setting themselves dead against all her pet prejudices. Now, I really am going; but if you do think of calling on Miss Berry this morning, don't be afraid of interrupting me. I shan't object to go with you."

"Nor I to go alone," said Cecil, laughing. "Ah, you have lingered a minute too long; here are three of the Lutridges coming up the steps. You will meet them in the hall."

Steenie disappeared through the window before Cecil finished her sentence, and she had to hurry forward to meet her incoming visitors to cover his retreat. She need not have distressed

herself. It never would have occurred to the Misses Lutridge that any one could possibly wish to avoid them, or that there were more agreeable ways of spending long summer mornings than in their company.

In vain Cecil glanced at her easel, and sent longing looks through the window into the garden, where the strong summer sunshine was gradually chasing away the morning shadows, and flooding every nook and corner with a full tide of glory. They would not take any hint to go, but kept their places, though Cecil's first attempts to find congenial topics of conversation were not very successful. They never read anything, they informed her, in answer to her questions. Oh dear, no! they had no time for reading. Miss Russel might look down upon Oldbury as a very quiet place; but they could assure her there was too much going on for that. They never sketched, they never took long walks, they did not care for scenery except when they were abroad—at home they played at croquet.

"It was such a mercy," the eldest sister remarked, "that it had never come into Mamma's head to object to croquet. She objected to almost everything else, even to going to church on week-days; and if it ever occurred to her to object to croquet, they did not know what would become of them."

They all three hoped, with a fervour that brought tears into their eyes, that dear Miss Russel liked croquet. They were sure she was not one of those old-fashioned people like Mamma who think all amusements worldly, for they had observed she generally attended early service at the new church, and that she had *Hymus Ancient and Modern* among her music.

Cecil was not allowed to protest against church-going being taken as a test of love of amusement, the conversation flowed on so fast, and she grew so bewildered between anxiety to avoid a gossiping, irreverent discussion on church principles, and dislike to being drawn in to join the young ladies' criticisms of their mother. The prevailing anxiety with each sister seemed to be to impress on her how entirely they all differed from poor Mamma, and how contemptuously they looked down upon the opinions in which she had endeavoured to train them. Cecil soon discovered that they were reckoning on her co-operation to enable them to give a character of greater gaiety to their garden parties and riding excursions this summer than they had ever brought their mother to consent to hitherto.

"You see," they explained, "Mamma is that kind of person, though she does say so much about not being worldly, who does

not like to do things in a different style from what is considered right in good society. So, if you would only second us, we really think a great deal might be done ; and we might get up some parties this year that would be worth going to, not, perhaps, anything so decided or so very delightful as a dance in our drawing-room after it got too dark for playing croquet. It would take a long time to bring poor Mamma round to actually giving a dance ; but she would let us have a large party, and keep it up as late, and everybody might be quite as much dressed as if we were going to dance, so it would be very nearly the same thing."

A sudden thought here came into Cecil's mind, which all at once made the prospect of croquet parties at Laurel House not only tolerable, but interesting.

"Are not the Blakes near neighbours of yours?" she asked. "Elsie Blake would be one of the croquet players, would she not?"

"Well, we ask her to spend an afternoon with us sometimes. Oh yes, we are very fond of her ; she is a dear little thing ; but we don't think it kind to invite her unless we are quite alone. The Blakes seem to be very poor—or something. They never by any chance ask any one to their house, not even to the quietest tea-party ; and when Elsie goes out for the evening, she is, oh ! so plainly dressed. Not plain merely in the way Mamma dresses ; for though she won't have fashionable or becoming things, she takes care of course that all her clothes shall be very expensive ; but Elsie is quite shabby. We asked her to a large party in the spring, when we had some friends staying in the house—Mamma would do it ; we advised her not ; and Elsie came just in her Sunday dress—a little lilac muslin, not new even, no ornaments, nothing but a bit of black velvet round her throat, and all that yellow hair she has twisted round and round her head in the most old-fashioned style. Of course everybody took her for a nursery governess, or something of that sort. We felt it was the truest kindness to leave her quite alone, and not draw any one's attention to her ; but when the gentlemen came upstairs from the dining-room, Richard—that's our brother, Miss Russel ; you will have observed him at church on Sunday, with curly auburn hair and a white hat—took it into his head to go and sit near her in a corner of the room, and stay by her side a great part of the evening. We fancy his notice made her more conscious than she had been before how different she looked from our other guests, for she grew uneasy at last, and jumped

up from her seat, and walked across the room, and stood by the window alone, with her back to every one; and when Mamma made her sing a little while after, her voice shook as if it was just all she could do to keep from crying. What we saw that evening has convinced us that it really is not kind to put her in a position where she must feel the contrast between herself and us, for instance, so keenly——"

"I should think she must be so accustomed to the contrast she can't mind it much," said Cecil smiling. "I would secure her for your croquet parties if I were you. It is so convenient to have the regular players close at hand for the sake of practising together, you know. We must make a point of Elsie Blake's joining us, I think." The emphasis on the *we* and the *us* made the faces of the Misses Lutridge glow with delight.

"Oh, if *you* think so?" they all exclaimed in chorus.

That preliminary settled, Cecil listened to a long discussion of plans without impatience. The prospect of singling out Elsie Blake in her poor little lilac muslin dress before all Mrs. Lutridge's guests, and of snubbing Mr. Richard Lutridge in her behoof, imparted a flavour of interest to the croquet parties she had not anticipated for any Oldbury amusement hitherto.

Elsie Blake's timid glance of half recognition that morning had taken Cecil's heart by storm. There is such a thing as falling into friendship at first sight as well as falling into love, and this surprise of the heart has sometimes almost as much excitement and romance about it as the other. It had for Cecil. From that morning, chance encounters in the street with Elsie Blake, or incidental allusions to her in conversation, began to be looked forward to as the great events of a day; and when she merrily recounted them to her cousin, she was not at all surprised to find herself listened to with very eager interest.

The new unexplained sympathy brought a fresh element into their old brother and sister intimacy, and they had never been such close friends, or enjoyed each other's society so thoroughly as during the early weeks of Cecil's visit to Oldbury that year.

CHAPTER XIV.

MOONLIGHT IN OLDBURY.

CECIL was in high spirits and good humour with everything in and about Oldbury when she set off in the evening to finish her sketch by the river, and she would not acknowledge to her *cousin* that she had found her morning with the Misses Lutridge tiresome.

"No, even Oldbury gossip is not such a bad thing," she maintained. "One learns a great deal of human nature from it, and for what else does one study history? I have often wondered at myself for caring so much about people who lived a hundred years ago, while I am quite indifferent to the doings of my next-door neighbours. Oldbury curiosity is far more human and respectable; I like the people for it.

"I wonder whether you would like them, if you could hear what they are saying about you and me in the houses we are passing," said Stephen slyly. "Did you not perceive that Mrs. Adams crossed the road to satisfy herself that it is *your* port folio I am carrying under my arm? and is she not pretending to fasten her boot lace now, that she may ascertain to her satisfaction whether we turn to the river, or walk across the bridge when we reach the bottom of the street? Ah! just glance back at her; she has found another object of interest. Here is a little bit of Oldbury life for you."

Cecil turned, and could not help laughing, as she watched the stout old lady rush suddenly into the middle of the road, and drag back with her a dirty little boy, who had been happily walking up and down in a gutter.

"To think of its being you, Johnny Simpson," they heard her say, as she administered a vigorous shaking to the object of

her care, "and there's your poor widowed mother at home working her fingers to the bone this minute to pay for the shoes you are spoiling."

"Well, Steenie, I like it," Cecil said, looking up gravely in his face, as they walked on. "It's all very well to laugh, but it's just that I do like about Oldbury. Each person here knows something about the rest, and cares a little. Does not that make it a society instead of a mass of people thrown together? I don't think it is such a delightful thing to be able to do just as one likes because nobody cares for one."

"I've had too much experience of everybody caring for one to think that a delightful thing," said Steenie laughing. "I feel for Oldbury boys who can't enjoy a gutter without having an avalanche of fat old women down upon them. Ah! my friend Johnny Simpson has gone back to his mire. I shall make a note of him, and give him a halfpenny next time we meet."

"You are as much of an Oldburyite as any one here," said Cecil. "I believe you are on speaking terms with every man, woman, child, and dog in the place. You would understand how pleasantly this sociability strikes me if you had ever lived through a whole winter in London. Now I will tell you something that happened to me last year. I was coming home from church one Wednesday during that long dreadful frost, and I noticed a man sitting shivering on a door step. I passed him, and then I came back again, there was something in his attitude that struck me so. He lifted up his head when I spoke to him, and, O Steenie! I shall never forget the expression his face had. There was hunger in his eyes, like an eager live thing looking out, and sullen dumb despair everywhere else. He told me he had come out of prison three days before, and that he had been wandering about the streets ever since. His story might not have been true, but his pain was all the same, and the hard, angry despair; I felt so helpless before it. Of course I gave him some money; I have no doubt you will say it was a foolish thing to do, but I could think of nothing better at the time; and then he got up, and staggered down the steps, and melted into the crowd passing along the street. I went back to my bright, easy, safe life, and felt what a gulf of separation there was between me and a great many of my fellow-creatures. It was almost as if I had looked down into hell through that man's eyes, and found I could not even carry down the cup of cold water. Now people don't live so terribly far apart in Oldbury but that they can know something of each other's sorrows, and hold out

a helping hand. There is no unknown dismal nether world surging up, for one to get surprised glimpses into now and then."

"Not such abysses of dismal physical misery perhaps; but I am afraid you must not conclude that Oldbury decorum has nothing to hide, or that its easy-going, gossipy compassion has any help to bring to the deeper sorts of sorrow. If there are any real tragedies being acted out in Oldbury just now, you may depend upon it they are unsuspected ones, or that all the good people are busy heaping last straws on the fainting camel's burdens."

They had walked quickly as they talked, and now Cecil paused to take breath on the stone bridge spanning the Idle, which connected the High Street with one of the roads leading from the town.

The bridge was a sort of border land between as much of busy life as there ever was in Oldbury, and the solitude of the wide still fields, and the distant chalk hills, over which the sunset was spreading its hazy golden gleams and deep purple shadows. It was such a tempting place that Cecil could not forbear lingering, and looking down over the parapet. The water rippled slowly out of the black shadow of the bridge into curves of molten gold, that whirled and glittered past the tall sedges, over the stones, crimsoning, purpling, darkening through the shaded fields, till they were lost in the distance. Little children ran down the bank, and dabbled their feet in the golden water; a flock of geese suddenly appeared on the river's edge, and, hissing and screaming, flopped into the stream, and floated down with puffed out wings gleaming like snow; market girls and labourers on their way from the fields rested their baskets or their tools on the parapet, and talked and laughed low to each other. Mrs. Lutridge and Mrs. Adams might be ever so much scandalized at her conduct in lingering on the bridge with the market girls, but there was so much to see that Cecil could not tear herself away. All at once the sweet bells of the old church began to ring out the curfew, and Cecil and Stephen turned to each other with a simultaneous cry of delight.

When they moved on again, Steenie made Cecil observe the sympathetic glances which a young man and girl, who were standing together in the quietest corner of the bridge, turned on them as they passed.

"The bridge at sunset is the orthodox place for love making

in Oldbury. I hope you understand what we have been doing," he said.

Cecil walked a little more quickly after this, and was not sorry when they turned into the field path; but with all the haste she could make, it was too late for sketching when they reached the wide curve of the river, shaded by the tall oaks she wanted to draw.

They strolled slowly through the fields homewards while the summer twilight deepened, and, crossing the river higher up by a foot bridge, took a quiet path that led through the churchyard into the town.

"I want to show you something, and it is dark enough and quiet enough now," Stephen said in a grave voice, as he handed Cecil over a stile that led into the enclosure. They passed one or two untidily kept graves, till they came to a quiet corner of the place, where, enclosed within high iron rails, was a square brick erection, surmounted by a stone figure clasping an urn.

"Is it here?" said Cecil, under her breath.

"Yes, here. It's horribly heathenish, is it not?—the monument—horrible Oldbury taste; but I wanted you to know where it was."

Cecil stooped down and pulled away some straggling weeds that had insinuated themselves between the brickwork and the railings. "It might at least be made tidy," she said. "We could plant a flower border here, and I daresay my uncle would let this tottering stone figure come down, and have a plain cross put in its place."

"No, no," said Stephen quickly; "let it alone. A cross indeed! The whole town would chatter and quarrel over it. She had enough of that while she was alive. The weeds don't do her any harm, and she is at least let alone here."

"Steenie, she was very happy in Oldbury. I can never understand the bitter feeling you have about her life here."

"Because you don't know how I used to hear her spoken of when I was a child by the people about me. The solemn shakes of the head some of the good ladies used to exchange when her name was mentioned; the doubtful hopes about her state of mind and present condition they did not scruple to discuss before me, with conscious stretch of charity when they gave her a favourable verdict. For a long time I really believed that Mrs. Lutridge had made away with my mother, and had her shut up somewhere to prevent her over-indulging me; and how savage the supposition made me! I declare now!

don't think I was far wrong. It was the place that killed her. She could not have gone on living here: the chatter and the gossip, the prying of all those censorious eyes, and the heavy choking atmosphere, just crushed the bright tender soul out of her. I expect she was tired out, and very glad to escape away here, even after a year of it."

"How can you talk so? It is very unjust to your father. Don't you think he could defend her against the Oldbury ladies, even if they had been as censoriously disposed towards her as you make out?"

Steenie shook his head. "I don't know. Is he able to defend himself?"

"The truth is," Cecil struck in, "you are crazy on the subject of Oldbury interference. You will never rest till you and Mrs. Lutridge have had a regular quarrel and struggle for power on some subject or other."

"No, indeed; the days are past for that. I have nothing to do with her. She would hardly take upon herself to interfere in my affairs now, I suppose; and if she did——"

"Hush! you are speaking too loud," said Cecil. "I hear some one moving close behind us, near the yew-tree. We have been overheard all this time."

"Even here," said Steenie; "how annoying! I will find out who it is."

He turned quickly round, and stood in the narrow path to intercept the listener as he or she moved away.

A tall, slender female figure emerged slowly from the shadow of the yew-tree, and stood full before him, with the moonlight falling distinctly on her face. Cecil uttered an exclamation of surprise, and came forward, holding out her hand. "Oh, Elsie—Miss Blake—is it you who have been near us all this time? I am afraid we have frightened you. I am so sorry."

"Oh no; it is I who am sorry to have been here and disturbed you," answered Elsie timidly. "My aunt has gone into a cottage by the churchyard gate, and she told me to wait for her here. I tried to pass you once, but I could not, indeed."

"It is of no consequence; we ought to apologize for keeping you prisoner," Cecil said, and then a fit of dumbness seized her. She had been planning all day what she would say to Elsie, if she had a chance of speaking to her, and now that the opportunity had come she could think of nothing worth saying. The three stood staring at each other helplessly—their faces looking pale and large-eyed and agitated in the moonlight.

Elsie moved first. "My aunt is coming out of the cottage. May I not pass, please?"

The last sentence was addressed to Stephen, who had stupidly maintained his position in the pathway, hedging Elsie in between the wall and the great tombstone. He stood aside when she spoke to him, and, once clear of obstacles, Elsie's feet seemed to have wings. She flew down the steep pathway, over the stile, out of sight before the other two thought of doing anything but gaze after her.

Cecil broke the silence. "Look, she has left something down on the grass there, where she must have been sitting. An open book, is it not?" she asked, as Steenie dived down under the tree, and possessed himself of the relic. "No, you stupid fellow, don't dash off after her with it now. You can't possibly catch her up, and it will be an excuse for us to call to-morrow to take it back to her."

Steenie pocketed the book, and they left the tomb and struck into the broader pathway which led past the church, and opened on the High Street.

"How strange that *she* should be there!" Steenie said in rather an awe-struck voice after a long silence, just as they were leaving the moonlit churchyard for the town street.

"Yes, was it not strange?" Cecil answered more briskly.

They walked quickly along the street, and after an interval Steenie burst out again: "What a fool one makes of oneself when one is taken by surprise, to stand staring in that idiotic fashion! Why could not we think of something to say? It was disgusting."

"It does not signify," said Cecil coolly. "You have the book safe, and I can call with it, and see her any day I like."

"You—yes—you! It's all very well for you," said Stephen bitterly. "You have not been making yourself obnoxious by staring like an idiot. Your calling and seeing her won't do me any good."

"Well, we shall see. And at all events you need not scold me for your want of manners. Here we are at the Rectory."

"Come through the garden gate. Don't let us go indoors just yet," said Steenie. "I feel as if the house would stifle me."

Cecil complied, and they paced up and down the chequered light and shade of the lime walk once or twice.

"It is an extraordinary thing our having met her there, a wonderful thing," Steenie reiterated at intervals.

"Well, I don't know," said Cecil, who began to be surprised at finding herself so much the least excited of the two; "anybody may go into the churchyard who likes. There was nothing really wonderful in it. Steenie, I can't turn again; Grand-mamma will be angry with me as it is for staying out so late with you."

"Ah, well, go in then," said Stephen carelessly; "I shan't. I feel as if I could never bear the house again. I shall set off on a long stretching walk somewhere. Don't let any one wait up for me. There's something in the look of things to-night that makes one feel as if one could walk on, and on, and on, indefinitely through the moonlight, till one reached—one does not know what exactly."

"Some sort of dream-land," said Cecil. "Yes, I know the feeling; but I should not have thought you were the sort of person to have it."

CHAPTER XV.

FLOWER ASPECT.

ELSIE did not mention her encounter in the churchyard to her aunt, and Margaret was too much pre-occupied with the scene she had left, to notice a little perturbation there was in Elsie's manner when she rejoined her.

"You need not have run so very fast; I could have waited a minute or two," she said, and then they walked on in silence.

Elsie was as indisposed to talk that evening as Margaret. She was busy settling with her conscience whether she might recall the conversation she had accidentally overheard, or whether she ought to try to forget it. It had interested her very much. She was glad to have a satisfactory explanation of the apparent indifference to Oldbury, for which she had so often blamed her old playmate. She found it was pleasant to be relieved from the spirit of antagonism she had been cherishing against him. Yes, she would recall and often think over what he and Miss Russel had said to each other. It was better to do that than be unjust. She walked with a springing step up the hill; but Margaret paused, and turned, before they reached the top.

"What an exquisitely still night!" she said. "I am glad we had energy to come out after tea, for I found I was wanted at the Bowmans' cottage."

"How is poor Jane Bowman to night?" Elsie asked, with sudden compunction for not having made the inquiry sooner.

"Dying," said Margaret shortly. She stood looking over the sloping hill-side to the moonlit fields beyond, for a minute or two, before she spoke again. "Yes," she said, in a gravely satisfied voice, that jarred terribly on Elsie's shocked feelings,

"I don't think she can possibly have to live till morning. It is a beautiful night for a person to die in."

"Or to live and be happy in," cried Elsie vehemently. "Miss Berry thinks Jane Bowman may recover yet. Why will you never hope, Aunt Margaret?"

"I do not encourage false hopes," Margaret answered. "But in Jane Bowman's case any reasonable person's hopes ought to be the other way. Prolonged life would be anything but a boon to her."

They turned into the lamplit streets now, and Elsie was glad. Margaret's sorrowful words had spoiled all the beauty of the evening for her. She was glad that the end of their walk was near.

When they reached the house, Margaret went to her room, and sat for a long time at the open window, realizing the solemn scene that was now passing in the cottage she had left. The hour afforded her one of her brief seasons of perfect peace that was almost joy. A solemn kind of triumph came over her, as she thought of the weary, repentant, pardoned soul breaking from the prison-house of the body, where it had struggled and suffered long, into light and peace at last. There was escape for other prisoners that way. Men might decree definite periods of punishment, but the merciful heavenly Father, who looked into the soul, and knew when its stains were purged, had a warrant of release in His own keeping. There might be mournful results of sin still to be worked out on earth by the survivors when the guilty soul was pardoned and freed. Let it be so. The innocent were stronger to endure than the guilty.

Margaret bowed her head on her hands, and prayed—"Only give them strength, O merciful Father, to bear themselves bravely and patiently under the strokes. Enable them to make the offering of their lives ungrudgingly—sharing so the office of the Great Atoner. Let it be the joy and brightness of their lives that is withered up, but keep their hearts tender and pure -- unembittered, uncantered by the chill influence of the shadows through which they have to move."

Elsie did not follow Margaret upstairs; she threw off her hat in the hall and ran into the drawing-room, where Mrs. Blake was impatiently awaiting her return. The sitting-room, unlighted and uncurtained, with the two old people seated in their arm-chairs on opposite sides of the fireless grate, looked somewhat dreary, but then it nearly always looked so when Elsie was not in it.

"You have been out a long time, darling," Mrs. Blake said, not querulously, but with an accent of surprise in her voice, that showed how seldom she had anything approaching to neglect on Elsie's part to complain of.

"I could not help it, Grannie," Elsie answered, hastening up to Mrs. Blake's chair, and stooping over her to caress her soft withered cheeks and forehead. "I was afraid you would want me, but I could not get home sooner. Aunt Margaret told me to wait for her, and I sat for more than an hour under the yew-tree close to Mrs. Pierrepont's grave. I wish——"

"Well, sweet one?" Mrs. Blake asked, as Elsie came to a sudden pause.

"I was going to say I wished I had not gone out this evening, but I think I am glad I went. It was very pleasant in the churchyard while I was waiting for Aunt Margaret. I watched the rooks coming home from the fields to the tall trees in the Rectory garden, cawing and making such a noise as they settled for the night; and then a jackdaw came hopping over the graves and looked at me. It was bright moonlight before the glow of the sunset was over; and just as I was beginning to weary for Aunt Margaret to call me, who do you think came over the stile from the river fields——But, Grandmamma, had I not better draw the curtains, and light the lamp? Grandpapa looks very dull sitting there without his book."

Mrs. Blake was no longer able to wait on her husband as she had formerly done. In the autumn of the previous year she had had a stroke of paralysis, which disabled her from walking alone, and all the little household duties she had been used to perform now devolved on Elsie. Mr. Blake was, to outward appearance, very little changed. He still wrote in his study, and listened to Margaret reading aloud, with the same apparent interest; but his mind was really growing feebler every day, and he was subject to sudden fits of irritability, from which Margaret suffered more than any one else in the house. Mrs. Blake's voice had always power to compose him, and Elsie had a bright tact and ready sympathy that enabled her to avoid causes of offence.

Elsie took a long look out into the garden before she finally dropped the curtain.

"Moonlight is very beautiful, Grandmamma," she said, settling herself on a stool at Mrs. Blake's feet. "I don't think you know how nice it made everything look to night—people's faces, and everything."

"Did it, darling? Well, I am quite satisfied to see your face by lamplight. That makes it quite beautiful enough for Grandmamma."

Elsie looked up quickly, as if she hoped some further question would follow her remark, but Grandmamma was not in an inquisitive mood that evening. Stroking Elsie's head with her one capable hand, she sank into a silent reverie, and Elsie's *thoughts took wing*, and like Margaret's, flew down the hill again; but they stopped at the brightly lighted Rectory windows, and busied themselves in picturing the party assembled within, till Margaret came down from her room and rang the bell for evening prayers.

The next morning Elsie had about as great a disappointment as, in her uneventful life, could have come upon her. On returning from her morning's walk with Margaret, she found a little parcel lying on the hall table, and learned from Crawford that a young lady and the young gentleman from the Rectory had called and asked very particularly to see her, and left that when they heard she was out.

Such an event as some one calling and asking to see her had never occurred in Elsie's whole life before. She tore open the parcel, and found the book she had been reading in the churchyard, of which she had not once thought since she left it behind her. As she pushed it away impatiently, her eyes fell on some words pencilled on a card her visitors had left. She was devouring them when Margaret came up, and looking over her shoulder, read with her—

"We are so sorry not to find you. Why don't you come and see me? Have you forgotten your old playmate, Cecil Russel?"

Beneath, in an almost illegible scrawl, came a postscript:

"My cousin forces me to add that we are ashamed we did not ask leave to walk home with you and your aunt last night, as it was so late."

Margaret turned the card round contemptuously when she had finished reading. "How absurd of those children to talk of walking home with us, as if we could possibly want their company! Well, it is fortunate we were out—a lucky escape. Of course we need not return this call, and they will not trouble us again."

"O Aunt Margaret, may not I?" cried Elsie imploringly; "it would be such a pleasure to me. Please let me call on Miss Russel at the Rectory."

"My dear, I cannot," Margaret answered decidedly; "and you must not encourage these young people to come here again. Your grandfather does not like to see strangers about the house."

"O Aunt Margaret, I do think you are cruel!" Elsie exclaimed. "You put it on Grandpapa, but it is in reality you who keep every one away from us. You don't care to have any friends yourself, and you won't understand that Grandmamma and I are not as cold-hearted as you are."

The words rushed almost involuntarily from Elsie's lips on the provocation of her extreme disappointment; but she repented them the next minute, when she heard Mrs. Blake's feeble voice calling anxiously from the drawing-room to know what they were talking about.

When Margaret's and Elsie's explanations were made, old Mrs. Blake seemed even more agitated by the question they were discussing than Elsie had been.

She read the words on Cecil's card over and over again, and sent wistful inquiring glances into Margaret's resolute face to see whether there would be any use in endeavouring to change her decision. Then with a sigh she fell to stroking Elsie's flushed cheek, as if she were trying to smooth the vexation out of it.

"Never mind, Granny," Elsie said cheerfully when Margaret had left the room, "I won't say another word. Nothing signifies so much as your being worried. Aunt Margaret can't take you away from me, or make us love each other less, though I sometimes think she would if she could, I have seen such a strange expression come on her face when we have been making much of each other."

"My darling, you are unjust to Aunt Margaret; you don't understand what her looks mean. If you only knew! Don't call her cold-hearted again. She has had great sorrows in her life—terrible sorrows."

"But so have you. She has not suffered more than you."

"I don't know. Some people take their troubles more hardly than others. I am not so wise as Margaret. I don't see all the consequences of things as she does."

"If Aunt Margaret had only acknowledged that it was a disappointment, I should have borne it better," Elsie pleaded. "Every one in Oldbury is talking about Miss Russel; and it does seem hard that I am to keep out of her way, when she comes to seek me."

"Well, darling, it is very hard. Perhaps Margaret did not

quite mean that. I can't think there would be any harm in your seeing a little of Miss Russel, or even of young Mr. Pierrepont, now and then. Miss Berry tells me that they are engaged to be married, and she thinks they will very likely be a great deal at the Rectory now. They might prove good friends to you some day, when you may want friends. You had perhaps better not say anything more to Margaret about calling at the Rectory, but we will wait and do the best we can, you and I."

There was not much to build on in the promise, but Elsie went away perfectly satisfied. She considered that she had Grandmamma's permission to take advantage of any chance opportunity that might arise of renewing her intimacy with her old playmates, and somehow or other she felt considerable certainty that the opportunities she wanted would not fail to come. Just for once in her life she had a happy conviction that the thing she herself wished was desired at least as eagerly by people more capable of attaining their wishes, and in that knowledge she rested.

The experience of the next few days did not disappoint her. She did not depart in the least particular from her usual habits, and yet she seldom went out now without something happening to give an interest to her walk. Very little things, to be sure. Cecil Russel tripped across the road to shake hands with her in Aunt Margaret's very presence, or Stephen Pierrepont came up to her, in the Lending Library, while she was struggling to lift down some old *Quarterly Reviews* her grandfather wanted from the topmost shelf, and insisted on helping her, and on keeping her a few breathless minutes in conversation, while Aunt Margaret stood stiffly waiting behind. Small incidents certainly; but then it was a new thing for Elsie's walks to afford any incidents whatever; and about these there was a curious subtle flavour of finding herself made much of, and treated as a person of some consequence in the world, which to Elsie was the newest experience of all. She could not help perceiving that Stephen Pierrepont was quite eager and nervous about helping her with the books; his hands trembled as he lifted them from the shelf almost as much as did her own; and when Aunt Margaret interposed decidedly to cut short his entreaties that he might be allowed to carry them up the hill for her, he looked as disappointed and crestfallen as if it were he who was in want of companions, and could not speak to whom he liked.

Aunt Margaret went into the Lending Library alone the next time they walked to the town, and sent Elsie to make some purchases in an uninteresting china shop close by; and on that occasion, by some strange freak of circumstance, it was into the china shop that Stephen Pierrepont dropped accidentally, —to enquire after one of the shop-woman's children who was ill, he said. Cecil Russel followed a few moments after, and the three fell into conversation about old times, and made such rapid advances in intimacy, that Elsie found herself discussing confidentially with them the probability of her being allowed to attend the croquet parties at Laurel House, about which everybody in Oldbury was talking just now. They were all so eager laying plans to bring about this desirable result, that they did not see Aunt Margaret when she came into the shop to discover what was detaining Elsie so long. Elsie felt very angry with herself for colouring violently when her aunt spoke to her, and Margaret's quiet way of looking over Cecil and Stephen as if they were pieces of furniture, and giving the orders Elsie had neglected in a few quick words, made her more uncomfortable than ever. Stephen showed a determination not to be ignored, that completed her embarrassment. He would not see that Aunt Margaret did not acknowledge his bow, and he actually followed them beyond the door of the shop with a last suggestion about the croquet party, though Elsie was too much awed by Aunt Margaret's surprised, upraised eyebrows to make any answer.

Margaret broke the uncomfortable silence between them when they had made a few paces up the street.

"I suppose there can be no doubt that young Pierrepont is engaged to his cousin?" she said, in a more complacent tone of voice than Elsie expected to hear just then; "they would not be so much together if it were not so."

Elsie did not know whether an answer was expected from her or not. It was a new thing for Margaret to ask a question that savoured of commonplace curiosity about her neighbours' concerns; and the question itself required thinking about. She had heard the suggestion before, and had nothing to say against it; but just now it seemed to put her two friends before her in an unexpected light. Engaged to be married! She could not help casting a furtive glance back to look at them again and realize the idea. Cecil was stooping down talking to one of the shopwoman's children, and Stephen, with his back to her, was looking after them up the street. Elsie caught his

eye, and resolved that she would never be so ill-mannered again as to turn back to look at people; but though she kept her eyes steadily fixed on the ground, she knew when Cecil and Steenie crossed the road, and was aware that they were talking eagerly to each other as they walked up the street, and while they stood on the upper door-step of the Rectory waiting to be let in.

Cecil's face, all bright and sparkling, as she looked up at her cousin while making some last remark before she entered the house, was a picture Elsie recalled a great many times.

She glanced down at her own dim Quaker-like costume, and contrasted it with Cecil's dainty prettinesses. What could the two cousins have thought of her? She was quite sure that they had looked at her, and said something to each other about her, when they passed her on the opposite side of the street. She could not help wondering what it was, and worrying herself with conjectures till she reached home, when she had to brighten up to give a pleasant account of the incidents of the morning to her grandmother, old Mrs. Blake.

She would, perhaps, have been as much puzzled as enlightened if she had overheard the conversation that did pass between the two cousins.

"What was it we were reading the other day?" Stephen began, after he had taken that last glance across the road at Elsie's down-drooping face, which she had felt more than seen "something about an old Welsh magician and his witch-wife who made a maiden out of flowers. Let me see. They took flower of the broom, and flower of the meadow-sweet, and flower of the rye——"

"And when they had made the maiden, they baptized her and called her Flower Aspect." Cecil went on, "A prettier and more appropriate name than Elsie Blake, is it not?"

"Nay, I don't know," said Steenie; "for my part, one might come to mean as much as the other, I think."

"So that came into your head just now," said Cecil. "Dear me, how poetical a prosaic person gets to be when he is in —— Well, I beg your pardon, Steenie; I won't finish my sentence. When he is brought in contact with a lovely, griffin-guarded, mysterious lady, we will say, with whom he cannot play unlimited croquet. Do you know, I think we are making a mistake in trying to draw Elsie Blake in among the Lutridge rabble? She will not look as like 'Flower Aspect' with a mallet in her hand."

"Why not? A person who won't do for ordinary occasions is worth very little, I should say."

"Now you are prosaic again. I am the truest lover, for I have the reverential feeling that will not bear to see the divinity descend from its pedestal."

"Nonsense, I thought you were in earnest about wishing to see more of her."

"Things are come to a pretty pass when *you take me to task* for not being in earnest. Here we are at home. You must not turn round and stare again, for you have behaved very badly already, but *I shall take one look more* before the door is opened. Certainly that is a remarkable pair to be walking down Oldbury. I suppose the good commonplace Oldbury people have grown so used to them that they don't perceive how out of the ordinary course of events they are. Griffliness must have been very beautiful once herself. I wonder what it is in her face that impresses one so? There is a sort of fire in it though it is so cold. It looks as if some sudden blow had dashed the spirit out of it, and turned it into stone. Some one says that every face should be a prophecy or a history. There go the two together, if one had but skill to read them."

"I will excuse you the history," Steenie said; "the prophecy will be the most interesting, if you will only read what I want in it."

They had entered the house by this time, but, as was often the case with them, they were too much interested in the conversation they were carrying on to be ready for the interruption of fresh company. They stood one on each side of the library door, Cecil with her hand on the lock hurrying to get out what she had to say before it was necessary to open the door.

"I don't mean anything like fortune-telling, of course, only I think I can read in her face that there is a great deal more than just the flower aspect. She is not altogether made up of meadow-sweet and the bloom of the rye. She looks now as if she had walked straight out of imagination land and scarcely saw anything in Oldbury; but that is only because she has been forced to lead such a still, solitary life. She wants waking up—but mind I am not saying that you are the Prince to do it. I won't take upon myself to say that."

"No, indeed! Why don't you open the library door, and give one a chance of sitting down somewhere?"

"Now I think of what I am doing, I am going upstairs," said Cecil.

She ran lightly up the steps laughing to herself. "At all events, Papa's warning was thrown away," she soliloquised. "I must say I cherish a little grudge against him for fancying that Steenie and I could not spend three months together in a country house without growing silly. There will be some fun in seeing Steenie vindicate his power of falling in love desperately, which Papa evidently doubted. I can't help being rather amused at it all. Steenie's transparent little devices to make me talk about her all day long, and his determination to cheat himself into thinking that the interest is all on my side, and that he is doing it all to please me, are so absurd. What an odd sort of transformation this falling in love is! One wonders what it can be that gets into people and makes them up fresh. I have never seen such a look in Steenie's face all the years I have known him, as there was while he was talking of nothing to that girl, whom, after all, he does not know much about. Well, it's odd, and rather frightening, when one comes to think of it. I wonder whether she sees it as plainly as I do? Perhaps not, because she does not know his usual face so well. I hope I am not playing with edge tools. I hope I shall not be led into doing anything that Papa would call meddling. If only he were here to look on and keep me in order!"

CHAPTER XVI.

A DREARY DAY.

ALL Oldbury was talking about Mrs. Lutridge's pleasant garden parties, and Elsie Blake could not help feeling some girlish mortification at the small chance there seemed of her having any share in the general gaiety.

The note of invitation which Cecil had undertaken to procure for her arrived in due course, and was quietly torn up and made into spills by Margaret, without its calling forth a word of remark from any one. Elsie had meditated an appeal to her grandmother, but Mrs. Blake happened to be unusually unwell during the fortnight when the croquet excitement was at its height, and Elsie could not find it in her heart to trouble her about such a trifle.

Just at that period, too, the elders of the household had rather more than usual of the air of pre-occupation and mystery that often made Elsie feel as if she were shut out from them and banished to a world of her own. When she came suddenly into the drawing-room, she frequently found Margaret reading letters aloud to her grandmother, which were hastily put aside when she came near, and often, after being thus occupied for an hour or so with Margaret, Mrs. Blake would shut herself up in her room, and forbid any one to go near her. Elsie was less depressed by this state of things than a new-comer into the family would have been. She generally did well enough in her dream world, but every now and then a longing for sympathy and companionship came over her, and she felt cold among her shadowy companions, almost as if she were a dream herself, or a hangeling from fairy-land, who could not persuade the denizens of the upper world to recognize her.

The day of Mrs. Lutridge's gayest and last garden party happened to be one of peculiar gloom in the Blake's house. Mrs. Blake burst into a distressing fit of tears during dinner, and had to be led upstairs by Margaret, and Elsie had to sit out the rest of the dinner hour with her grandfather, making vain efforts to persuade him to sit still and eat, and being at last obliged to content herself with watching him as he wandered up and down between the dining-room and the foot of the staircase, moaning and wringing his hands. There was some relief when Margaret came down-stairs again and reported that Mrs. Blake was better, and had composed herself to sleep. She persuaded her father to retire into the study with her, and very soon Elsie heard the sound of her voice reading aloud, and the scratching of Mr. Blake's pen. They had settled to their afternoon's occupations just in their ordinary way, and Elsie was left to her own resources for recovering her equanimity after the agitation of the day. She went out and paced up and down Margaret's favourite avenue at the end of the garden. It was generally too gloomy for her taste, but to-day she was glad to avoid a view of the road, along which a stream of carriages was wending to Mrs. Lutridge's white house at the top of the hill. She could hear the constant sound of wheels, and even the click of the mallets and balls, and now and then a shrill tone of voice or burst of laughter from some of the players in the next garden. How merry and light-hearted most people seemed to be! Elsie wondered how it would feel to get into some one else, into Cecil Russel for example, just for one afternoon, and breathe an air that had no mystery in it.

It was nearly dark before she could make up her mind to return to the house, and when she entered she found Crawford watching in the hall to waylay her.

"Just run upstairs to your grandmamma, Elsie dear," the old servant whispered, "without letting Miss Margaret know. She is wearying to see you."

Mrs. Blake was propped up in bed, looking very much flushed and agitated, when Elsie came to her.

"If I had only known you wanted me," Elsie began remorsefully.

"I did not want you till now, darling. Margaret advised me to be quiet and not to think, and, oh, I have been trying to do as she bids me. She means it for the best, but she does not know how short my time is, or she would not oppose my making this one effort, this one last effort;—I cannot rest till it is made."

"Dearest Granny," Elsie cried, throwing her arms round her, and feeling, as she clasped the trembling form, strength to defy all the world in her behalf, "tell me what you wish to do; let me help you. I will manage so that you shall have your own way, whatever Aunt Margaret says against it."

"Nay, darling, we must not talk of going against Aunt Margaret. I don't wish to deceive her. It is only because I have not strength to argue the question with her any more to-night that I ask you, instead of her, to do this little thing for me. I want you to run down to the gate and watch till Miss Berry passes, and bring her up here to speak to me. Be quick, or she may have gone, and I shall not rest till I have seen her."

"Is that all? Lie still then, dear Granny, and I will manage it beautifully," Elsie said, a good deal surprised, and a little disappointed that some more difficult service was not required of her.

Elsie's impatience and curiosity had time to grow very strong during her watch at the gate, before the welcome sound of wheels told her that Mrs. Lutridge's guests were beginning to take their departure. Lady Selina's carriage, with Cecil in it, rolled past; then came Stephen Pierrepont, escorting two laughing, rosy-checked grand-daughters of Mrs. Adams, who were spending the summer in Oldbury. The sound of their voices in gay, bantering talk, reached Elsie's ears before she caught sight of them.

It began to be rather embarrassing to stand at the gate, a spectacle for all Mrs. Lutridge's visitors to stare at. Presently, however, Miss Berry, arm-in-arm with the Rector himself, appeared, and Elsie hastily opened the gate and went into the road to meet them. Miss Berry looked a little blank when she heard her request. The walk down the hill with the Rector had seemed such a crowning point to the attentions which, thanks to Cecil and Steenie's manoeuvres, had been showered upon her all the evening, that it cost her something to give it up. She did not hesitate, but her acquiescence was rather incoherently worded.

"My dear! your good grandmamma! The loss of the pleasure I have been promising myself in my walk home shall not be thought of. Mr. Pierrepont, in his great kindness, will excuse——"

"Certainly," Mr. Pierrepont put in quickly. "If I can be of any service, pray let me know. I wish to be at the call of every

one of my parishioners in cases of illness or trouble; meanwhile, don't let me detain you. Good evening."

Elsie did not feel herself included even in the parting salutation. Mr. Pierrepont's manner had never been cordial towards her, and during the last few weeks there had been something in his way of looking or not looking at her when they met, that gave her an uneasy suspicion that she must unwittingly have done something to incur his displeasure. She was not disposed to echo the admiring exclamations in which Miss Berry indulged as they were walking up to the house.

"'At the call of every one!' such a truly noble sentiment; and, my dear, at any cost to his own feelings, I am convinced he would act up to it. You may smile at the notion of middle-aged people having regrets of the kind,—but what am I thinking of? It is of your grandmamma's illness we are speaking, and if I can be of any use—yes, I see, the back stairs, a most sensible precaution, though you may depend on me to be quite silent when we get near the sick-room."

Elsie's caution was not needed, for Margaret met them on the stairs; and a single glance at her quiet, sad, disapproving face, told Elsie that she had heard of her errand, and had yielded the subject of dispute, whatever it was, between herself and her mother. She thanked Miss Berry for her kindness in coming. "You must not let my mother trespass on your good-nature," she said; "I trust you will refuse the request she is about to make, if it will inconvenience you to grant it."

Miss Berry began to be quite excited by the mystery she had come into the midst of. She had never felt so important in her life as when Elsie took her up to Mrs. Blake's bed-side and left her to her secret interview. It did not last many minutes. Before Elsie expected to see her, Miss Berry reappeared. The seriousness had left her face; it was all smiles and nods and beaming satisfaction. She seized Elsie's hand's and kissed her before she spoke.

"My dear! such a trifle to make all this fuss about. One would think we were the worst neighbours in the world in Oldbury. To be sure, it is years and years since that little bed in my spare room has been occupied; but I have kept all in tolerable repair, and you will put up with deficiencies, won't you? Next week your grandmamma is so obliging as to say she will trust you to me, and I must hurry home at once, or Caroline will complain that I have not given her time to prepare. A visitor to our house—such an event! I shall

come for you myself that you may not feel the parting. I don't think I ever was more gratified in my life."

Miss Berry shot out these broken sentences during her progress down stairs, and Elsie was too much bewildered by the extraordinary prospect they seemed to hold out to say much in reply. As soon as Miss Berry had left the house, she hurried back to her grandmother's room.

"Grandmamma, what does it all mean?" she said, coming close to her, and kneeling by the bed. "It can't be true. You can't have been plotting to send me away from you."

"But, darling, you have so often said you should like to go," Mrs. Blake answered coaxingly; "and I have planned this little visit for you, because I can't bear to leave you quite alone here. Won't you like it?"

"But why, do tell me why you are sending me away? What made you think of it? If you are only going the usual half-yearly journey, why cannot I stay here with Crawford?"

"Because we shall be away longer than usual this year, and I am so helpless now I must take Crawford with me. Margaret thought I had better stay at home, but I could not endure the thought. I must go while I have strength left. You won't make difficulties, dearest? You will go to Miss Berry's to please me?"

"Anything for you, Granny; but—" There was a pause, and Elsie's eyes grew eager. "But, O Granny, could not you take me where you are going? You know how I have wondered and longed all my life to see the friends you visit every year, and love so much, and never talk to me about. Could not I go? Am I not old enough to be trusted yet?"

It was the old vexed question, which Elsie felt impelled to repeat every now and then, though she knew by experience that nothing but pain ever came of her bringing it forward. She was always sorry the instant the words had passed her lips; and to-night a keener repentance than ordinary seized her, for Mrs. Blake's face twitched nervously, and a bewildered look came into her eyes.

"Don't, dear," she said piteously, "it hurts me so. I cannot bear it to-night. You must not ask me any questions, for I don't know what I may say. You will be happy while we are away, won't you, Elsie, and show Margaret that no harm has come of our trusting you from us just this once?"

"Why should Aunt Margaret be afraid of my being trusted?" Elsie asked indignantly; but she did not press the

question. She saw that Mrs. Blake was growing more agitated every moment, and she endeavoured to calm her by talking cheerfully about the proposed visit, and by dwelling on the speed with which the time of separation would certainly pass.

After the first shock of surprise was over, Elsie could seem pleased with her prospects, without effort. The half-yearly absences of the elders of the family had now recurred so often that she had grown almost tired of speculating about them, and she quickly came to the conclusion that the next best thing to sharing the journey was to escape the lonely week at home. She had so longed for a change—for some event to occur in her life—and now a change had come.

As she went about the house helping Margaret with her preparations, she could not keep her feet from taking a dancing measure as she moved, or her voice from breaking into little snatches of song, even though she knew that Aunt Margaret's grave eyes were following her about disapprovingly.

On the last evening, when she was kneeling down arranging her possessions in the little old portmanteau that had so often accompanied Margaret on her mysterious journeys, she looked up suddenly in her aunt's face, and ventured on a remonstrance her thoughts had been framing constantly during the last few days.

"Aunt Margaret, you won't allow me to go on this journey with you, you won't tell me what it is makes you all so anxious and unhappy, yet you don't like me to be pleased at the thought of staying behind with Miss Berry. Is it not rather hard? If you would let me share your cares, I would not have another thought but of them. I would give up everything to be of use to you—oh, so gladly! But you won't do that, and yet you are surprised if I forget myself for a moment and look happy."

"You mistake me, dear," Aunt Margaret answered gently; "I am not surprised, and I don't grudge you any pleasure you might safely enjoy. I am sorry about this visit, because I do not think it is safe for you. You will be exposed to the temptation of forming intimacies that must be broken hereafter, and which may lead to painful disappointments. I am afraid my warning you against making new friends while you are left at liberty to see whom you like will not do any good; yet I am not sorry to have this opportunity of giving you the warning."

Margaret finished her sentence by stooping down to kiss Elsie's forehead; but though her manner was kind, her words fell very coldly on Elsie's ear.

To be kept out of the confidence of the relatives to whose affection she had a natural right, and yet to be warned against making friends of her own choice, seemed too cruel a lot to be quietly acquiesced in. In her inmost heart Elsie resolved not to be frightened by Margaret's foreboding words, or held back by any cold fear of consequences, from responding to the affectionate warmth with which she knew she should be welcomed where she was going.

Miss Berry's beaming face pervading the house on the morning of the day fixed for the journey was an astounding innovation on the old routine, which Elsie could hardly realize, even when it was before her eyes. Her cordial presence kept up Mrs. Blake's courage at the last, and made the parting between her and Elsie less solemn than it would otherwise have been.

Then, when the travellers had taken their departure, came to Elsie the new experience of turning her back on the deserted house, now given up unreservedly to be dealt with by Crawford's usual coadjutors in the house-cleaning, and walking down the hill to take up her abode in Miss Berry's cheerful little home.

The rest of the day passed in a bewildering excitement of pleasure. All Oldbury seemed to have conspired to make a festival of Elsie's visit. Miss Berry's house had been beautified, and the room where Elsie was to sleep refurnished with a taste and magnificence that it quite took away her breath to see. And though Miss Berry was always hinting at some mysterious agency by which the changes had been brought about, and disclaiming Elsie's gratitude on her own account, she invariably checked herself in time to prevent Elsie's curiosity from being finally set at rest.

Cecil Russel flashed in and out of the house a dozen times in the course of the afternoon, to see if anything was wanted. Mrs. Adams brought a basket of the first apricots that had ripened in her garden to stand on the tea-table. Even Mrs. Lutridge sent her servant round with her compliments, and a packet of clothing-club cards, which she thought Miss Elsie Blake might like to employ her spare moments in adding up.

Later in the evening, Stephen Pierrepont looked in to advise Miss Berry not to tire herself by too much conversation with her guest this first evening, and instead of going away again in five minutes, as he said he should, he somehow or other stayed, and took Elsie's entertainment on himself so effectually that Miss Berry was able to nod comfortably over her knitting much in her usual way till bed-time.

It was altogether a wonderful afternoon and evening to Elsie. But strangest and sweetest of all was the waking in her pretty room next morning, to see Miss Berry's kind face bending over her, and hear her plead in excuse for being there, that she had just slipped in the first thing to look at her asleep, and satisfy herself that the happiness of having her safe under her roof was not a dream.

It was the first time in her conscious life that Elsie had opened her eyes on new objects. How sunny and heart-warming the brightly furnished room looked, filled as it was with bewildering tokens of the care with which it had been prepared for her coming ! For some moments she could scarcely understand what had happened. Where was she ? How had it all come to pass ? Was she still in the old familiar careworn world, or had she wakened up that morning into some region quite new ?

CHAPTER XVII.

AN EVENING OF MISUNDERSTANDINGS.

THE fact that Elsie Blake was coming to spend a fortnight in the little house opposite, had been made known to all the inmates of the Rectory about half an hour after Miss Berry's interview with Mrs. Blake.

That same evening Cecil Russel was called from the drawing-room, where she was amusing herself by watching Steenie drawing caricatures of the croquet players on a sheet of sermon paper, abstracted from the desk at which Mr. Pierrepont sat writing, to hold a private interview with some one. She came back with a very radiant face, and danced up to Stephen's chair.

"Such wonderful news as I have just heard! You must guess it, Steenie. I will give it you in ten, I will give it you in a hundred, I will give it you in a thousand, as Madame de Sevigné says."

"What a thorough Oldburyite you have become in six weeks!" said Stephen, yawning. "News indeed! Somebody's High Church cat has got into somebody's Low Church cellar, and stolen all the cream, and Mrs. Lutridge considers it a sign of the times."

"It is something you will really care to hear."

"It must be something startling then just now. Let us see. The highest of the curates has offered to Miss Ursula Lutridge since we left, and Mrs. Lutridge has thrown a croquet ball at his head."

"Now I can make him grave in an instant," Cecil thought to herself; and she stood silent, not liking to part too soon with the conversational missile she expected to hurl with so much effect.

"That's not a caricature you have been drawing since I left you?" she observed at last, peering over his shoulder. "I declare it's a very pretty picture of *her*. How did you come to see her standing like that at her garden gate? Now then for my news. She—Flower Aspect herself—is coming to stay for a week or two at the house opposite. Griffliness and the rest of the family are leaving Oldbury, and she is coming here. Now, is not that news?"

Cecil had thrown her stone, and could not help a little laugh of triumph as she observed the disturbance it effected. Stephen had one of those unmanageably expressive countenances that leave their owners completely at the mercy of experimenters like Cecil.

His voice was more under control. "Well, yes," he answered deliberately, "a tolerably ingenious invention for Oldbury to amuse itself with. It is not true, of course?"

"But it is. Miss Berry has been here, begging me to go across to her house to-morrow morning to look at the room where Flower Aspect is to sleep, and advise how it can be made comfortable for her. I shall go, but I shall be puzzled. To what sort of rooms do fairy princesses resort when their brazen towers are thrown down? Ought there to be spindles in them, or magic mirrors? Do you think you could ride off anywhere to get a bottle of that wine Christabel's mother made from spring flowers, for her to drink?"

'A wine it is of wondrous powers,
My mother made it of spring flowers.'

Just the beverage for Flower Aspect."

"I wish you would not talk such nonsense," said Stephen. "Why don't you explain what you really mean? You cannot mean that Mr. and Mrs. Blake are leaving Oldbury for good, and that their grand-daughter is to be left behind?"

"I shall call it for good if they give her up to us for a week even. It will be giving her up *to us* if she goes to the house opposite, for we three shall always be together. We shall grow quite intimate. What a much pleasanter way of seeing her than meeting at Mrs. Lutridge's! Steenie, how grave you look about it. Are not you immensely glad?"

"I! Why should I be? I don't know. What is it to me?" said Stephen quickly.

He could not bear Cecil's laughing, questioning eyes on him any longer. He got up, took a turn or two in the room, and finally wandered through the open window into the garden,

leaving Cecil to answer the questions of the two elder occupants of the room, whose attention had by this time been drawn to what was going on.

"Dear me!" Lady Selina began, "how I wish it was not the custom in this house for people to go in and out continually all the evening. It is one constant opening and shutting of the door, and it puts an end to anything like rational conversation. I began to tell you, some time ago, what I said to Mrs. Lutridge about the fire at Compton Deane the year after I was married, and I have not been able to finish my sentence yet, for the constant rushing in and out of the room there has been."

"You fell asleep, Grandmamma," said Cecil; "that was why you never finished your story. I have only been out of the room once, and Steenie has been drawing."

"The door has been opened and shut continually," persisted Lady Selina. "I never do sleep in an evening—I only wish I could. I heard every word you said to Stephen. You told him that Miss Flowers, of Ashton, was coming to stay in Oldbury. I did not know she had any friends in the neighbourhood. I wonder she did not write and tell me."

"No, no, Grandmamma; I said Elsie Blake was coming to the house opposite, that was all."

"One would think I had grown quite deaf or stupid from the way you contradict me, Cecil," Lady Selina grumbled. "Yet my hearing is very acute, and I am certain you did say something about Miss Flowers. If you and Stephen choose to make mysteries, I suppose you must; but I beg you will not try to persuade me that I am in my dotage yet."

"I assure you, Grandmamma, there is not any mystery. I called Elsie Blake 'Flower Aspect,' a name Stephen and I have invented for her; that really was all."

The bell rang for evening prayers, and the servants came flocking into the room before Lady Selina could take in this astounding explanation. Mr. Pierrepont glanced gloomily towards the open window, through which Stephen did not appear in answer to the summons, and then began to read in a tone that plainly betokened dissatisfaction.

Cecil felt herself in disgrace in that quarter too. She was convinced that her uncle laid the offence of Steenie's absence at her door, and as soon as the service was over, she tripped up to his desk, and by way of making amends, busied herself in helping him to put away his books and papers. His

brow relaxed as her dexterous fingers reduced the melancholy looking heap of letters and sermon notes to order.

"This is what I always do for Papa," she observed; "he says I am worth a second secretary to him."

"He is a lucky man to have you," Mr. Pierrepoint answered. "I should envy him, if I did not remember that he cannot hope to keep you always; that is the worst of having a daughter. Now my condition may improve. When Steenie marries and settles down here with his wife, as I trust he will do eventually, my time for being waited upon will perhaps begin."

Cecil dived down under the table to pick up an errant paper as her uncle spoke; but she knew quite well what sort of look was on his face, and what was the vision he was conjuring up before him as he finished his sentence. She had read his thoughts on that point once or twice before since she came to Oldbury, and she did not know whether to be most provoked or amused at his blindness. To-night amusement predominated, and she emerged from under the table with quite a broad smile on her lips.

"You are a perfect sunbeam in a house," Mr. Pierrepoint said admiringly. "But, my dear, there is just one remark I wish to make. Considering how every word spoken here is liable to be repeated and commented on in the town, do you think it quite prudent to give young ladies by-names in your talk about them with Steenie? I should be sorry if any of the Blake family had reasonable cause to complain of disrespect from us."

Cecil's cheeks crimsoned. "Dear Uncle, how could you think Stephen would speak disrespectfully of any young lady, of Elsie Blake least of all. It would be quite impossible, too. The name is only because we admire her so very much."

Mr. Pierrepoint's countenance seemed to say that did not mend the matter.

"The Blakes are a very respectable family, but there has never been any intimacy. Why should you speak of them at all? and what made Stephen rush out of the room in such an impetuous way just as the servants were coming up to prayers? I wish you would give him a hint not to leave the room at prayer-time before all the servants. It has happened once or twice before, and I am vexed to think what might be said about it in the town. Do give him a hint that I do not like him to be so inconsiderate."

"I should have thought, sir, there was no occasion for you to give hints about your wishes in this house," said Steenie's voice, as he came suddenly upon them from the shadow of the window, by which he had just re-entered the room. "I am quite ready to come to prayers as often as you like; but if it is for the townspeople's sake you wish me to say them, don't you think it would be a good plan for us all to buy little bits of carpet and kneel out in the streets, as they do at Cairo: then all Oldbury will have the benefit of knowing we perform our devotions regularly."

Mr. Pierrepont looked a good deal annoyed. "I was speaking to your cousin," he said; then, without further remark, he turned his back upon them both, locked his desk, and left the room.

Stephen's sarcastic speeches generally had the effect of shutting him up in this way. He neither rebuked nor openly resented them; but their constant recurrence was gradually building up a wall of reserve between the father and son, which all Cecil's vigorous efforts to bring about a better understanding between them could not remove. Yet they were all the time very much attached to each other, and did not fail to suffer each in his own way from the little jars that thrust them apart.

Cecil turned upon Stephen with the books she had collected piled up in her arms, her eager face and indignant eyes flashing upon him over the barrier.

"Now, Steenie, it was a shame of you to say that to him. It was like accusing him of hypocrisy, and you know perfectly well you don't mean that."

"I suppose I don't; but I could not help what I said. It disgusts me beyond anything to hear him confess such paltry motives for caring what I do or leave undone. I can't help asking myself, 'Is it really all humbug, then?—Is it a show we are keeping up for the Oldbury people's edification, and winking in each other's faces all the time, like Cicero's two augurs?'"

"No, no. You know a great deal better than that. If his fear of your causing scandal among these prying people is a weakness, you have no business to judge it. Do you know, I think it is right down cruel and cowardly to make sarcastic speeches to a sensitive, anxious-minded person like your father. Your words hurt him a great deal more than you can understand. It is as bad as striking a woman."

"Women can strike hard enough themselves, I perceive," said Stephen, "and I suppose one must not venture to complain of their blows being cruel."

"You deserve it; and besides, you don't really care for anything I say to you," Cecil answered, relaxing a little in her wrath.

"I don't know about not caring, but I will confess I deserve it if you like. We used to say 'a kiss for a blow' when we were children;" and Stephen stooped down and touched her forehead with his lips.

Cecil could not be angry. His face had just the same self-convicted expression on it she had seen often enough in old times at the end of a quarrel. She was only rather vexed with herself for having let the conversation take a more earnest tone than had been common between them since she came to Oldbury.

"After all, I am not the person you have got to make it up with," she said. "You are wasting your penitence on me. I had better have left you to your own reflections, and contented myself by putting my uncle's books away for him. There must be some perverse spirit abroad to-night that drives me into contention with every one. I little thought when I ran in with Miss Berry's good news that it would have the effect of setting us all by the ears."

"Give me the books; I will take them to the library. My father is there, and I want to speak to him. But stay, just a minute—tell me what you call your good news again; I don't think I ever heard it rightly."

"Oh yes, you did," said Cecil; "I told you all there was to tell, and it only made you cross."

"But there must be something more. Come, I am not cross now. Miss Berry was talking to you for ten minutes at least. She must have said something else—something about her. Do be merciful, and try to recollect."

"I am sleepy, and want to go to bed," remonstrated Cecil. "I should have to rack my brains till morning to disentangle Miss Berry's sentences. The exclamations of delight, and the entreaties that I would glance round the little room, and just be so obliging as to point out—and that I was not to scruple about expense; it was so easy to make up by a little extra economy by and bye. You can imagine all that."

"That I can. Dear old Elderberry, don't I know the flutter and triumph she will be in at the prospect of lavishing luxuries

on her guest, which will have to be made up for by months and months of painful pinching when she is alone again."

"Do you mean that Miss Berry's circumstances are so straitened that it will really inconvenience her to have a visitor for a few weeks? I had no idea of such a thing. She never says a word in all her incoherent talk that would lead one to suspect she had any cares of the kind, and she does so delight in being hospitable."

"Yes, and the thought of the future self-denial her hospitality involves is the very core of her delight. She is calculating now how many dinners and how many fires she can do without by and by, that she may feel justified, as she would say, in using no stint while her friend is with her. I know her if nobody else in Oldbury does, for we have had some confidences together in old times. The good, foolish, generous, noble, old soul!"

Cecil's eyes glistened as Steenie went on. She liked him a great deal better praising Miss Berry than quarrelling with his father, or even rhapsodizing about Elsie; and was not sorry to have waited to hear this.

"Well," she said "if you do know so much, I don't think you ought ever to make sarcastic speeches again, or sneer about augurs winking at each other. You must see how real *it* is with her. And she would tell you *it* all came from your father's teaching."

"I never doubted its being real," said Steenie; "only——"

"No, no, don't argue yourself into cold blood again. Go down and speak to your father while the glow of admiration for Miss Berry's goodness is on you, and let me go to bed."

But Cecil turned back again before she reached the staircase.

"O Steenie, such a delicious thought has come into my head! I will go to-morrow and really see what is wanted to make the little room comfortable; it has not been occupied for thirty years, and is, I expect, in a very forlorn state. I will persuade Miss Berry to let me get what is necessary. We will choose things that will really be useful to her afterwards, and write a pretty note, and ask her to accept them from us. She will not refuse, for the sake of making the house comfortable for Elsie."

"Admirable!" said Steenie; "but you must be content with helping to choose—you will leave all the rest to me. I am the oldest friend, and have the best right. Come, you must acknowledge that."

Cecil could not help laughing at the eagerness on his face.

"You covetous, greedy creature," she said, "you want to

monopolize all the thanks and gratitude to yourself. It is very base, when the thought was mine. However, we will quarrel about that to-morrow."

"You had better let me manage it; it would be a pity to risk hurting her feelings or spoiling her pleasure in this visit. It is a piece of promotion and glory such as she will perhaps never have in her life again."

"Promotion and glory! having Elsie Blake to stay a few weeks in her house?" cried Cecil with a note of interrogation in her voice. "Good-night. You are growing too absurd to talk to."

"Well, I hope I am not doing wrong?" Cecil soliloquized as she brushed her hair. "Poor Uncle! I wish he would not look at Steenie and me, whenever we are talking more eagerly than usual together, with that terribly satisfied look on his face. I can't help reading the thought that is in his heart at the moment, and it does provoke me that he should be so utterly blind, and misunderstand us so. I am afraid it makes me a little more inclined—but no, I will not say that I am encouraging anything, for really I am acting just as I should if Steenie were still abroad. If people will betray their secrets to me, I can't help it, or help pondering over what I discover. Certainly this falling in love is a strange contradictory sort of thing. Tennyson may say what he likes about the 'chord of self passing in music out of sight'; but as far as I can make it out, it is after all rather a selfish kind of unselfishness. Here is Steenie really thinking it a privilege for Miss Berry to be allowed to sacrifice her comfort for a year or so to entertain Elsie Blake. He has scruples about depriving her of such glory, and by and bye he will quarrel with me for the right to manage every little thing with which she has to do, and think himself magnanimous when he throws me a scrap of trouble. I have seen that sort of thing before, men harnessing their mothers and their sisters to the chariots of their lady-loves or their wives, and driving them—to death almost. They don't mean to be selfish; they really think it *is* quite enough for some people, unattractive sisters and so on, to bask in the reflected rays of their happiness, and that they have no business at all to want a sun of their own. Yes, and there are women who live all their lives long in the cold white moonlight of other people's reflected joy. It is not a bad kind of light to live in after all. It may leave some dark, ghostly corners in the heart unwarmed; but, like the other moonlight, it lets a great deal be seen overhead that sunshine hides"

CHAPTER XVIII.

FIRST DAYS.

"HEAVEN is made up of first days ; hell perhaps also." Elsie slowly translated the words from the "Flegel Jahre," which she and Cecil were studying together seated in the window recess of Miss Berry's little sitting-room, and then she paused reflectively.

"What odd things he does say, this gigantic Jean Paul," remarked Cecil ; "but go on, I can't make out the next sentence, and you know more German than I do."

"Odd !" cried Elsie, and instead of reading on she let the book slide from her fingers, clasped her hands round her knees curled up on the window seat, and looked out of the window with far off dreamy eyes that saw nothing in the little street. She was thinking of her own experience of a first day, in the light of which the opening clause of Jean Paul's sentence was quite intelligible to her.

That first evening at Miss Berry's had indeed been a happy time. It had been like coming out of a dark cellar into a warm sunlighted room, and knowing first how dismal the darkness had been. Could she ever go back into the dark, or had the happy days of this last week made a gulf in her life never to be crossed again ? Elsie confidently told herself that they had. She should be a different person when she returned home. She should carry a sunshine with her, that the other inmates of the house could not fail to be gladdened by. She should never feel lonely again. She had found such friends as she had been longing for and dreaming of all her life. The thought of them would make every place bright, and all her life would now be made up of heavenly first days.

"Now you have put on your most unmistakable 'Flower Aspect' look," said Cecil; "you have escaped back to the bloom regions from which your magician father and your witch mother brought you when they distilled you into a maiden, and I shall not be able to get at you for a long time. Yet I should like to see what you are looking at, if you could show it me."

"I am only thinking about myself," said Elsie. "I began with Jean Paul's sentence, but it took me straight off to recollections of my own, and I had forgotten all about the book when you spoke."

"That's not like your usual way of musing over what you read," said Cecil. "Stephen and I had a discussion last night when we went home, after that thorough talk about favourite books we had had with you, and we made out that your enjoyment of poetry and novels is quite different from ours. We admire and discuss and realize by a sort of effort, but you seem to have lived all the stories you have read, as if you had got inside the heroes and heroines by turns, and made them real."

"So they are," said Elsie; "a great deal more real than any live people have been to me till now. I wonder whether I could explain to you how it is. The people I have lived among have never shown me anything but their outsides. I have always felt all my life that they were thinking of and caring chiefly for something quite apart from the everyday affairs of which they talk to me. The book people, who explain their thoughts, and take me into their confidence about their loves and their troubles, are much more alive. I have lived with them really ever since I could read; it has only been my body that has filled up a space in our house along with the other automatons that move about there."

Cecil shook her head. "It was not a good way of living, and it must have been very unsatisfactory," she said.

"Dreadful sometimes when I woke up," said Elsie; "it was just as if I had been walking about in those golden and purple spaces one sees between the clouds at sunset, finding them at first as substantial as they look, and then they had broken away suddenly, and let me down into nothing."

"You should have brisked up, and set yourself to some sort of work," said Cecil.

"I did try. I had fits of studying hard, and often I got Crawford to let me help in the housework; but whether it was because no one ever seemed to care what I did, or only from my

own laziness, I always found that in a little time the study or the work grew even more chopped strawy than the fancies. Then the dream world made itself up solid again, and took me into it."

"And that's how you come by your flower aspect?" said Cecil meditatively.

A little colour rose to Elsie's cheeks, and her voice had an earnest tone in it as she went on.

"I hope I should have struggled harder if I had seen any way of being of real use to any one. Once Miss Berry put it into my head to ask Aunt Margaret if I might teach a class in the Sunday school. It seemed such an opening to get out of my unreality; I did so long to be allowed; but when I spoke to Aunt Margaret——"

"Well," cried Cecil; "she could not be angry with you for having such a wish as that."

"No; but she looked surprised, almost frightened at my having had the presumption to think I could teach anybody anything. I can't tell you all her face expressed. She was not angry, though Margaret can be angry; she looked grieved and shocked, as if I had proposed a preposterous thing. Her way of taking that request of mine was a worse downfall to me than any of my descents from cloudland. I don't think I have quite got over it yet. It brought back an old nightmare of my childhood—a fear that there is something in me different from other people. Don't laugh at me, Cecil; you would not, if you knew how dreadful that thought is to me."

"A dreadful thought that you are not like the six Miss Lutridges and the two Miss Adams! My dear Flower Aspect, you really must not expect me to sympathize with you if that is your trouble. No, no, you will have to make up your mind to it. People will always turn their heads to look after you when you come into a room or walk down a street, and I am afraid they will be apt to bring against you the terrible accusation that they have never seen anything like you before. When they begin to talk to you, they will be still more disposed to make an exception of you, though perhaps by and bye, when you have left Oldbury and seen more of the world, you will cure yourself of that way you have of asking questions with an eager look in your eyes, as if you really cared for what the answer was to be. You will grow commonplace, and learn to talk languidly about nothings like the rest of the world, and so perhaps get rid of some of the pretty dimples and glows and

smiles that now make it worth people's while to go on looking after the first surprise of you is over."

"You put it in a very flattering way, but I see even you think me an oddity," said Elsie.

"It is a sort of oddity one easily learns to put up with."

"Ah, you are kind; but I am afraid the Miss Lutridges don't find it easy. You laugh at my quoting them, but you don't know what they have been to me. How, ever since I can remember anything, I have longed and longed for them to make friends with me, and felt that I should think so much better of myself if they would acknowledge me for a young girl like themselves. When we were all children together, I used to be invited now and then to spend a day at Laurel House. Grand-mamma and I always had a struggle with Aunt Margaret before we could persuade her to let the invitation be accepted. When leave was given, how I longed for the day to come! and when it came, how forlorn and wretched I used to feel in that school-room of theirs while they talked over their school companions and amusements, with just a condescending word of explanation to me now and then, that somehow made me feel more left out than entire neglect would have done. Even while I was longing for their notice I felt they were right, and that I should be quite out of place in the bustling wide-awake school world they described."

"Such conduct was natural enough in vulgar school-girls, but surely they behave better now."

"Since we have been grown up I have only gone to Laurel House once or twice when they have had evening parties, and I can't say I have found it any pleasanter. I don't think the girls mean to be unkind, but they take it for granted that I am ashamed of my plain dress, and wish to keep in the background; and when any compassionate person seeks me out in my corner and begins a conversation, they look astounded, as if some wonderful thing had happened, or I had been misbehaving somehow. You can't imagine how uncomfortable and puzzling it is."

"Not the least in the world puzzling. The compassionate persons are gentlemen of course. I can quite imagine how the twelve green eyes shoot evil fire at you for not hanging your flower head low enough to escape notice. They will be more surprised still some day."

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind; I want to ask you a question. You said

your Aunt Margaret could be very angry. Do you mean that she has ever been angry with you?"

"Yes, sometimes, when I used to give way to fits of passion as a child; and once not very long ago, when I came home in great wrath from Laurel House, and was silly enough to console myself for the treatment I had received there, by repeating something our old servant Crawford had once said about the Lutridges being upstarts, and ourselves come of a real good old family. I don't know why the stupid boast annoyed Aunt Margaret so much, but if you could have seen her face when I repeated it. You must not suppose that very angry with Aunt Margaret means violent. She did not say much, but the few words she spoke gave me the impression that her very soul was shaken by the agony of anxiety she felt to tear away from me at once and for ever the shred of pride I was trying to deck myself with. Her look that day gave my self-opinion another dash down to the ground. I expect I must naturally be very vain, or I should not remember my falls so vividly, and feel so bruised and sore after them."

"Poor little flower head," said Cecil; "I don't think it ought ever to have had anything but the softest wind and the gentlest rain to bend it. I don't understand your Aunt Margaret; but she has such a grand face I can't help believing she has good reasons for all she does. Perhaps she has seen some very great misfortune brought about by pride, and thinks it her duty to take extra care to keep you humble. My father thinks too much suppression as injurious as too much praise. We will conclude that you have had enough snubbing now to last for your life, and that the time has come for you to emerge from the shade and unfold all your delicate petals in the sunshine."

"It is you who have brought the sunshine then," said Elsie; "and it looks wonderfully bright. That was what I was thinking about when you spoke just now."

"I! well, yes, I believe I have something to do with it for the present," said Cecil, smiling.

"You and Miss Berry and every one who has been kind about my coming here," Elsie continued, with a conscious effort to speak the whole truth. "I know how thoughtful you were for me before I came."

"Other people had thoughts as well as I," said Cecil. "That sliding bookcase filled with German books, from which you took the 'Flieg! Jahre' for example, I should not have had the face to

send it and its contents as a present to Miss Berry—who does not understand a word of German, and has a secret horror of German literature as something dangerous and explosive—if my cousin Stephen had not insisted vehemently that it was the fittest ornament for her drawing-room he could select. How far his judgment was warped by his having discovered that you read German I can't undertake to say. You know it was a volume of Tieck you left under the yew-tree that night. He seems to have managed to pick out all your favourites."

"It is wonderful that any one should take so much trouble for me," said Elsie, turning to the window again.

Cecil watched the glow deepening on her face as she looked away, and said to herself:

"There now, am I not disinterested? I am sawing away at the plank of my own importance as hard as I can. When it is quite cut through, how far shall I fall? They both like me disinterestedly on my own account; I know that. But all the grand halo I wear now is not mine. By and bye I shall not be needed. I shall shrink to my proper dimensions in people's estimation, and find out what my exact place is. Ah, she is really looking out into the street now. Stephen said something about coming in here before tea; it is time to expect him. She sees that I am observing her, and wakes up out of her dream."

"Do you know, I think we have been idling in the window-seat long enough," Elsie said. "Miss Berry's servant and tyrant Caroline has gone to bed with a severe temper ache, and I have undertaken to bring in the tea-tray and make the toast. It is time I went to the kitchen to look after the fire."

"Let me go with you," cried Cecil. "The highest ambition I have in the world is to do something in a kitchen; and when I attempt to effect an entrance into ours at home, the cook charges me with arms akimbo, and puts me to ignominious flight up the stairs again."

"It is the most picturesque place in the whole house," Cecil pronounced, after tripping round the kitchen, as she perched herself on a corner of the spotless white dresser, and divided her attention between watching Elsie's proceedings with the tea-tray, and examining the various utensils that depended from the shelves above her head.

"Spices! how deliciously they smell! What a complicated machine a spice-box is, to be sure; I shall never get the divisions screwed right again. Oh, the flour dredger! I must use it a little. What nice soft white flakes come out all over the board!

I wish you could think of something for me to do with the flour. It is very ignominious to come into a kitchen merely to put out cups and cut bread. Flower Aspect, could you not put on an apron, and make a pudding as Ruth Pinch did? I forgot to mention it before when we were talking of heroines, but I do think that the one I most like to contemplate is Ruth Pinch, just as she is flouring the basin for her pudding. I envy her that glorious picturesque pudding; don't you?"

"I envy her for having a brother to make a pudding for, perhaps," said Elsie.

"Yes, and a lover coming in just at the right moment; you must allow there is something in that."

"But I don't think it was at the right moment. I have had too much experience in pudding-making to believe in its picturesqueness. Her hands would have been sticky and her hair floury. I can't understand John Westlock's falling in love with her just then."

"Oh, but I can; and what is more, I understand the man in the 'Bothie of Tober na Buolich,' who could not feel any admiration for the ball-room young ladies, and was conquered at once by a girl turning up potatoes with a pitchfork; and Werter, too, with his Charlotte cutting bread and butter. That is the style of falling in love I do understand. Don't you remember that man in the 'Bothie,' and what he says about conventionalities being such a barrier against love, and about the pleasure of labouring together. Stephen was reading it aloud to us the other day."

"Yes, but I don't think I agreed with him," said Elsie hesitatingly.

"I must descend from my elevation and come nearer to you. This is a difference of opinion we must talk out thoroughly. Give me another slice of bread and a toasting-fork, and let me kneel by you. We have discussed all manner of subjects since you came, and this one, which girls are generally supposed to think of so much, has never come into our talk yet. Now will be a good time for it; for if our cheeks do get red, there is the fire and the toasting to lay the blame on."

"My cheeks will not get red," said Elsie; "I have really nothing to say, except that I don't like quite such literal ugly things to be mixed up with the beginning of it. I have never seen, or even heard any one tell an actual life love-story; but in books I confess I like a little romance to be thrown round it still. If it is a real solemn thing, that is to last for ever, and be

so much in one's life, it ought to have a beautiful beginning. Would not one rather be remembered by one's husband all his life like the 'Gardener's daughter,' than like Ruth Pinch with her pudding basin?"

"No," said Cecil, "not for me. The picture is ever so much prettier, but I don't think the reality would be so good. One can't be always standing among roses, with the light and shade falling exactly in the right places, and I think I had rather not owe so much to adventitious circumstances even at the very first. The thing is for a person to like one in one's commonplace, everyday ways; to like the ways just because they are yours, having sense enough all the time to acknowledge that other people's may be better. I should not care for misunderstanding love; the sort of love that casts a halo, and does not see the true object at all. What good would it do me for a man to fall in love with his own fancy and say I was it? If any one will ever undertake to know me almost as well as I know myself, and say, 'There now, you are what I want, I know all the ins and outs and quirks and turns of you, and I like you inside and out;' then—well, I should call that something. I don't want to be worshipped, I only want to be really known and made the best of."

"I suppose you consider yourself humble and reasonable for saying that!" exclaimed Elsie. "To me it seems—don't be angry with me—such immense self-confidence. It is very natural in you perhaps, but I could never say what you have said. I wish every one I come near to throw some sort of halo round me, and to let me hide myself in it. If any one I cared for should ever imagine anything very good about me, I think I might in time grow into becoming what my lover thought me. I should feel myself worth all that to him, and to believe it would, I fancy, almost make me over again. Now that is my idea of love and what it ought to do for one, and that is why I like the halo kind the best."

"Ah, there is something in what you say. I see that side of it now," said Cecil. "I suppose I am self-confident and you are humble. There's the root of our difference of opinion."

"Oh no, no, it is not conceited in you to have confidence in yourself; you really are not such a goose as I am; and besides——"

"Well, what besides?"

"Were not you speaking from experience? You must not think me impertinent, but the sort of perfect under-

standing you described, is it not exactly like you and your cousin?"

"Flower Aspect! Flower Aspect! I will not contradict you for calling yourself a goose, or a mole, or a bat, or all the blindest things in the world together, if you really think what you are saying. No, there is not the least likeness between Steenie's friendship for me and what we are talking about. I mayn't want to be made a heroine of, but I am not quite reasonable enough to be satisfied with the cool critical estimation I get in that quarter. I shall expect to be first with my lover, if I ever have one, at all events. Come, tell me who put that notion into your head."

"Miss Berry said something about your being engaged soon after you came to Oldbury, and Grandmamma and Aunt Margaret both repeated it to me before I came here."

"And you have believed it since you have been here?"

"Why should not I? I did not feel quite sure," said Elsie, finding just then either the fire or Cecil's eyes very trying to her complexion.

The two girls were silent for some time after this, and sat with faces averted from each other, diligently toasting their slices of bread before the fire. Cecil was glad she had had an opportunity of explaining away Elsie's strange misconception; but she felt somewhat disturbed by the unexpected turn the conversation had taken. In describing her ideal of what love should be to her, had she really given such a true picture of the dear old pleasant bright relationship between herself and Stephen, that Elsie could not help recognizing it? She had certainly never mistaken their friendship for anything but just what it was. Yet, after all, could any fresh feeling that might come to her in the future ever be as much to her as that friendship had long been? "Well," she said to herself, "there is no use in puzzling oneself about what is to come." She drew her hand across her forehead to push disagreeable thoughts away, and woke up from her reverie.

"I will tell you something, Flower Aspect," she exclaimed. "We have both burned our pieces of bread to cinders. Miss Berry has small chance of finding anything eatable on the tea-table, and we shall neither of us win hearts on the score of our useful qualities at this rate. What an opportunity we have lost! Just glance out of the window; here are Mr. Stephen Pierrepont and Mr. Richard Lutridge wending their way to this house from opposite quarters of the town. I suppose

Caroline won't condescend to come downstairs to open the door for them; shall we let them knock till they are tired, or give up our toasting forks and edify all Oldbury by acting house-maids together?"

"I think we will let them knock at the door till they are tired," said Elsie, putting up her scorched hands to her glowing cheeks. "I should not like to go to the door just now, and we really ought to get Miss Berry's tea ready."

"Well, they will tire all the sooner for there being two of them. Each will be consoled for his own disappointment by witnessing the discomfiture of the other. They have actually given it up already. Faint hearts! It is all very well for you to take up your loaf and begin composedly cutting fresh slices of bread—you won't suffer for it; but think what a cross face I shall have opposite me at the Rectory dinner-table all this evening."

CHAPTER XIX.

MISS BERRY'S DIPLOMACY.

MISS BERRY was not in quite her usual spirits when she returned home. She was very silent during tea-time, and sat with her head turned towards the window, keeping a nervous watch on the door-step, as if she were in momentary dread of some enemy effecting an entrance into the house. When the tea-tray was removed, and Elsie had wheeled her chair into the window-recess, and furnished her with her knitting, she recovered her equanimity sufficiently to be able to open out the subject of her uneasiness to her young companion—reaching it, however, through a more than usually zigzag path of preliminary talk.

"My dear," she began, "I am sure I hope I am not beginning to have what dear Mrs. Lutridge calls latitudinarian views."

Mr. Pierrepont said the other day that latitudinarianism was one of the crying sins of the day, and Mrs. Lutridge has no doubt about its being a frog—one of the frogs that are to come out of the mouth of the beast. Latitudinarianism—I am not sure that I pronounce the word rightly, but I know it means 'making excuses,' and I am afraid sometimes that I am a good deal too apt to fall into that snare myself. You will be shocked to hear it, but just now I have been thinking that there is more excuse than one would at first suppose for Roman Catholics and very High Church people going to confession, and wishing to place themselves, as Miss Ursula Lutridge says she has done, under spiritual direction. If such a thing is possible, it must be a great comfort. Dear! dear! dear! if only one could find some one who would tell one exactly what one ought to do, and who would stick to the same advice consistently, without turn-

ing round upon one when things go wrong and saying exactly the contrary to what was said before, what a much more comfortable thing life would be than it is now!"

"Do you think so?" said Elsie. "But perhaps it would not be fair to throw all the trouble of one's life on anybody else, unless," she added hesitatingly—"unless it were some one who loved one well enough to want to take it."

"My dear, I know well enough that it might not be right. The misery of having to decide for oneself is no doubt part of one's earthly discipline; and if only one is mercifully kept from injuring other people by one's mistakes, the misconstructions and harsh judgments that come upon one must be borne patiently."

"Who has been speaking harshly of you, dear Miss Berry? I saw something had grieved you directly you came in," Elsie said soothingly.

"Oh, my dear, I really did not mean to complain. I said to myself while I was taking my tea, 'There—I will not mention a word; I will be dumb on the subject to every one. I am acting for the best, and if anything should arise among all these young people, it is not my place to interfere.' I resolved to forget all that had passed between myself and Mrs. Lutridge this afternoon; but, my dear, there are some words that, applied to oneself, do give a pain one can't get over all at once; and then, too, while we were talking, something happened that almost seemed to warrant—Mrs. Lutridge had walked all the way from my district with me, and we were turning into the High Street when she made use of the expression that so weighs on my mind—'Match-maker!' I exclaimed—I could not help repeating her word; and at that very moment we came in sight of this house, and who should we see there but Mr. Richard Lutridge himself, in, I am sure, his very best clothes, and white hat, and cane and all, coming down the steps from my door. My dear, I really thought I should have dropped on the pavement. The look Mrs. Lutridge gave me! and Mr. Richard, when he caught sight of her, hurried across the road and passed us on the other side of the street, swinging his cane about, and putting on a defiant, sullen kind of look that must, I am afraid, have hurt his mother's feelings very severely, especially as he had declined to accompany her to a missionary meeting this evening on the plea that he had business that would detain him at the bank to a late hour."

"But still," said Elsie, "I don't see——"

"No, my dear, and very thankful I was, when I came in, to find you had not seen him. It was extremely prudent and self-denying on your part, and I hope it will come to Mrs. Lutridge's ears and soften her heart towards us both. Still, it does make me nervous to think that young man may still be prowling about. I may as well confess it to you at once, my dear; I have made a sort of promise to his mother not to encourage—though really how I am to set about discouraging—in fact, it was just that set me wishing for a director, whose advice I might follow without fear of being reproached with it afterwards. I make allowances for Mrs. Lutridge—an only son—and such high expectations as she has naturally formed for him; but I do think she might remember that, when Stephen Pierrepont first came back to Oldbury, before we heard of his engagement to his cousin, she did speak strongly to me about the duty of hospitality, and seemed to imply that I should be doing a good work in promoting intercourse between her young people and the party at the Rectory."

"Then it is because I am with you that she dislikes her son to come here now," said Elsie; "but what harm does she think I can possibly do him?"

Even Miss Berry smiled with a sense of amusement as she glanced at Elsie's beautiful face turned towards her with a deprecating, anxious question on it.

"As to harm, my dear, you have lived so much alone you don't know the sort of gossip; however, in moderation, I don't suppose even Mrs. Lutridge would object; but you see you have only been here about ten days, and Caroline complained to me this morning, that since you came she had had to leave her work to open the door for Mr. Lutridge fifteen times, and he never used to call here, not once in a year."

"I am sure his visits are not worth Caroline's trouble in opening the door," said Elsie, laughing; "he sits sucking the knob of his cane, and staring at us for ten minutes at a time, and then gets up to go away. I have often wondered why he came; I thought perhaps he had always had a habit of inflicting himself on you two or three times a day. If it is he who is weighing on Caroline's temper, I wish we could devise some measure for keeping him out of the house."

"My dear, you take a great weight off my mind if you are quite sincere in what you say," cried Miss Berry, sitting upright in her chair and looking herself again. "I have been very anxious, not selfishly, I trust, but I feel that a double responsi-

bility is laid upon me. I am responsible to your good aunt and grandmother for your safe keeping; and if anything had arisen between you and Mr. Richard, I should have felt bound to let them know that since the day when he stole a dish of apples from my sideboard, and tried to lay the blame on Steenie Pierrepont, I have never been able to think quite as well of his disposition as I could wish."

"You need not be afraid of my thinking too well of his disposition," said Elsie; "I have still such a vivid recollection of the frights he used to give me when I was a child, by setting his dog at me whenever I was alone in our garden, that I can hardly help running away and hiding whenever I see him coming now."

"But, my dear, don't let us be uncharitable," said Miss Berry, relapsing into her usual optimism now her fears were allayed. "I dare say he is very much improved. I don't suppose there ever was a young man who had more good advice showered upon him, in season and out of season, for dear Mrs. Lutridge is instant if ever any one was. No doubt her labours have been blessed. We will not judge him by what he was as a boy; it really seems natural to boys to be cruel."

"Do you think so?" asked Elsie doubtfully.

"Well, perhaps there are exceptions. I believe you and I are thinking of the same person at this moment, my dear. To be sure, Stephen Pierrepont was a very different kind of boy. He had a great many faults—it was terrible how disrespectful he used to be to dear Mrs. Lutridge; he was far oftener in disgrace than Richard, and kept me, I am sure I may say, in continual hot water, wondering what extraordinary trick he would take it into his head to play next. Yet he always was a favourite of mine; and now, in spite of that way he has of making out that he never does anything except for his own amusement, you would be surprised if you knew how many people there are in this town besides myself who could tell of thoughtful kindnesses they owe to him. I see by the colour in your face, my dear, that you are pleased, and I am not surprised, it is so very gratifying to hear anything good of a person one has known all one's life."

"Yes, very," said Elsie, and she stole her hand gently into Miss Berry's as she spoke, and began to smooth the bony wrinkled fingers, a good deal roughened with various kinds of work, with her soft velvety touch.

"My dear, there is a knock at the door!" exclaimed Miss

Berry nervously. "What shall we do? Should you object to putting your head close to the window and just finding out whether it is Mr. Richard Lutridge or not, before we commit ourselves by opening the door?"

"It is not Mr. Lutridge's knock," said Elsie. "It is some one from the Rectory."

"It must be Steenie Pierrepont then. Dear me, he is going on knocking; he will bring the door down. Mrs. Bolton will say I have parties every night of the week. I must run at once; and if it turns out that Richard Lutridge is lurking about, and should manage to get in before I can stop him, would you mind just running upstairs to your room and staying there till he has gone? Mrs. Lutridge could not call that conduct encouraging on your part, and it would be such a relief to my mind."

"I thought Miss Blake must have pricked her hand with a spindle in an upstairs room, and that you had all fallen asleep," Elsie heard Steenie say to Miss Berry in the hall; but as they entered together her shrill tones predominated.

"My dear, it is only Mr. Stephen Pierrepont, no one else: you need not run away. I looked out at the door, and the coast was quite clear. I think we may venture to draw down the blinds and light the lamp now without any danger of being surprised."

The lamp was one of the new luxuries that Stephen and Cecil had manoeuvred into the house, and Stephen had taken unfair advantage of Miss Berry's regard for it, to establish a custom of coming in every evening to light it himself.

"I think I do understand how to manage the glass and everything now, my dear," Miss Berry said after each lesson.

For the last two or three nights Steenie had prefaced his demure answer, about its being as well to be quite perfect before one left off learning, with a quick, playful, understanding glance towards Elsie.

It had been very strange to her the first time that one of those sudden, amused flashes from Steenie's eyes had taken her into partnership in his enjoyment of some oddity of Miss Berry's, or some characteristic speech of Cecil's. She was getting accustomed to his constant silent reference of everything to her, and had given up fighting against the conviction, which would grow stronger every time she was in his company, that, let him be talking or listening to whom he would, it was her opinion of what was said that was in his thoughts all the time.

The process of lighting the lamp had a tendency to lengthen out in Stephen's hands each time it was repeated. Miss Berry had once or twice had time for a comfortable nap, while the final adjustments of wick and glasses were in progress, and Elsie and Stephen stood opposite each other at the table, talking in low tones over their work.

"My dears," she would generally exclaim as she started wide awake from a neck-dislocating nod, "you need not whisper, I am not asleep; and if you will only speak loud enough for me to hear, I am sure I shall be interested in what you are saying to each other, unless indeed it is German, which is a language I never profess to understand, and indeed do not exactly approve of."

Apparently it usually was German, for though Stephen always rushed into a loud-voiced conversation at once, he never referred to anything that had been said before, and the subject he introduced always seemed quite as fresh to Elsie, when she joined in the talk after awhile, as to Miss Berry. To-night Miss Berry was too much disturbed in her mind to indulge in her usual forty winks. She made a great show of giving undivided attention to the lamp-lighting business, and would not allow herself to be puzzled by any of Steenie's mystifications.

"My dear," she said decidedly, "I mayn't understand about a vacuum, but I do see exactly how that handle is turned round; and the thought of your dear father being deprived of your company every evening for so many hours, weighs on my conscience to that degree——"

"That you actually meditate forbidding me to come to your house of an evening, Elderberry. Has it come to that between us?"

"My dear Steenie, you really have such an uncomfortable way of putting things. You know very well that if I only considered myself I would not say a word, though Caroline does object to the constant tramping in the hall, and has had one of her worst rigid fits in consequence, as Elsie Blake can tell you, for we had almost to carry her to bed between us. Yet, indeed, I would not have spoken——"

"No, no, I understand," interrupted Stephen; "you would not have thrown me over for Caroline. It is your stronger tyrant that demands the sacrifice; I marked the colloquy; I saw the terrific Gorgon brows lowering; I observed that you weakly quailed beneath her threats. O Elderberry, Elderberry! I did not think you were so base! So often as I have

stood by you! Did I not cook your clothing-club accounts, when you had weakly let yourself be persuaded into giving six-penny bonuses where Mrs. Lutridge had decreed threepenny pieces? At the school feast did I not stand over the children to whom you had slyly given a second allowance of cake, and force them to swallow their portions to the last crumb while Mrs. Lutridge's back was turned, lest your iniquity should come to light; and are you to give me up at the first word? Now listen, I refuse to allow you to burden your conscience with such remorse as you will feel if you give me up to our mutual enemy just now. You may order me out of the house as often as you please; I shall regard your future peace of mind, and come in every evening all the same."

"Do you mean that you really would?" said Elsie, laughing.

"Yes, really," said Steenie, crossing his arms on the back of the prie dieu chair from which he had just risen, and letting his laughing eyes rest on her face till the playfulness in them died out in a look of earnest admiration, under which Elsie's eyes fell.

"My dear," said Miss Berry, collecting her bewildered faculties just as the other two were unaccountably and silently drifting into forgetfulness of what had been last said, "you are a great deal too ready to fancy that Mrs. Lutridge is always thinking about you. She and I certainly did talk together for some time at the corner of the street, and you may have seen that I was agitated, but it had nothing to do with you. No one would think any harm of your coming in here for an hour or so of an evening; if your example did not encourage others to do the same. One makes allowance for a mother's anxiety; and really, Steenie, I think you might feel a little for the perplexity I am in, and not lean on that chair laughing, as if you did not care in the least whether you broke it to pieces or not. It is one of the old ones, and very cranky."

"I think you ought to be obliged to me for not crying, after the severe snub you have given to my self-importance," said Steenie, whose laugh had had a sound of relief in it that rather surprised Elsie. "So, that is what you are at! But you don't suppose I shall submit to be banished to keep Dick Lutridge in countenance. No, no; fight your own battles with him, Elderberry. You won't get any such help from me, I can tell you."

"My dear, I am quite aware that I am not a person of good judgment, and if it were not that so much is being said in the town just now about the ladies of the district church going to

confession, and troubling their clergyman about every little thing, I should just slip on my bonnet and go back to the Rectory with you, and ask your father (I see he is alone in his study to-night) to give me some plain rules for guiding my household, now that so many young people are making it a place for meeting together."

"Dear Miss Berry, I see how inconsiderate we have all been!" exclaimed Elsie, with crimsoning cheeks. "You have been intruded upon, and your comfort spoiled—it must not go on!"

"What are you aiming at, Elderberry? Is this the subtlety of the serpent instead of the harmlessness of the dove?" cried Steenie, colouring too, and laughing a little nervously.

The two remarks came together, and Miss Berry did not give either a direct answer.

"My dear Elsie, would you be so good as to run upstairs to my room, and search in my work drawer for another skein of crimson wool? You see, I have just come to the end of my ball."

Elsie fled gladly; and, as the door closed behind her, Miss Berry came nearer Stephen and placed her hand on his arm. A pretty pink flush rose to her soft wrinkled cheeks as she spoke. "My dear, I hope I am not taking too much on myself in what I am going to ask you; it is very embarrassing, and I am sure I don't wish to think any evil. But do you think, engaged as you are to Miss Russel, that it is quite right of you to come here every evening and stay so long, and talk all this German with Elsie Blake? I am sure you would not willingly mislead any one, or trifle with any one's feelings, so I only just put it to you—is it quite right?"

"As wrong as possible; very rascally conduct indeed," said Steenie quietly, "if I were engaged to Miss Russel; but then, you see, I am not. Does not that somewhat alter the case?"

Miss Berry reseatd herself in her arm-chair. "My dear, but this is a very startling assertion," she said. "Are you sure that you are not mistaken? Mrs. Lutridge told me her own self, and repeated it again to-day, that she has not a doubt about your being engaged, or as good as engaged, to Cecil Russel."

"Just on this one point, don't you think I may be better informed than Mrs. Lutridge? I am not engaged to Cecil Russel."

"But you are very fond of her, and you have known her all your life."

"Certainly. And I am very fond of you, and I have known you all my life."

"But everybody in Oldbury expects it. And it would exactly have suited your father."

"It would not have exactly suited me ; and neither Cecil nor I are people to marry because Oldbury expects it of us. My dear Elderberry, it won't do. Thrust that notion out of your head without further parley with it. See now, I am driven into making a confidant of you. I did not know I was profiting by a false impression, but now it is removed : you must not treat me as you have planned in your own mind to treat Richard Lutridge. I don't ask any partisanship from you, only that you will not manœuvre me out of your house while she is here. I shall get savage, and be driven to underhand ways if you do. I give you fair warning."

"But your father?"

"Leave me to manage my father myself. It will be all right, if officious friends don't interfere between us. Why should it not be right? He has too much affection for me to thwart me without reason in a matter that concerns the happiness of my life. You think well enough of him to believe that, don't you?"

"The happiness of your life? But, my dear Steenie, that is saying a great deal. You have known very little of Elsie Blake till within the last ten days. You can't have got to care so very much for her in such a short time."

"Well, I suppose I shall not succeed in making you believe anything else, but that is not precisely my own view of the case. If I were to talk till midnight, I could not make you understand what it is to me, or how long it has been nearly all I cared for. Do you remember my sending you that list of college honours? Well, I sent it for the chance, just for the chance, of her seeing it. I had worked for that. I thought more of that one possibility than of all the other congratulations I received. Come, Elderberry, you are romantic at the bottom, as all good women are ; you mean to stand my friend so far as keeping my secret goes, and letting me have a chance of teaching her to care for me while she is here. You know I can't get even that when she has gone back to her own home."

"My dear Steenie, I wish you would not go on talking so fast, you keep my head in a whirl. It is all very embarrassing. I certainly do wish it was Miss Russel you were attached to."

"But then you see it is not, and I am afraid I cannot change

even to accommodate you. There is no use going back to that idea. Elderberry, I am making a mistake in letting you fancy you have so much in your power. You can forbid my coming to your house, and of course I shall obey you; but you are not a very vigilant guardian. I shall find other opportunities of meeting her. You had better not make it a war of wits between us."

"Only I have a conviction, my dear, that when you come to think it all over calmly, and consider what a difficult position I am in, you will not choose to act against my wishes. Your good feeling will not allow you to do so. It might, to be sure, have an awkward appearance if you suddenly left off coming to this house; but you know your dear good father was urging you only the other day to pay a visit to some friends of yours who have lately come to live at Connington. I heard him speak about it my own self. It seems a way of escape from our difficulties mercifully provided; and you must not be angry with me for begging you to go away for a few days, just till Elsie Blake's friends return to Oldbury. It is not as if I were a superior person, like dear Mrs. Lutridge, who could trust her own judgment on all occasions. I am so foolish, and so unfit for responsibility, that I am really obliged to ask you not to make my charge too heavy for me to bear."

There was a few minutes' silence.

"I begin to think you have the most subtle Machiavellian intellect of anybody in Oldbury!" Stephen exclaimed at last, in an aggravated tone. "It's the most horrible tyranny in the world you are exercising over me; putting your weakness forward as a shield that you know I can't knock over. It's a great deal too bad. I have been vowing all day that nothing should induce me to go to Connington while Elsie Blake was in your house. Come, we will make a bargain. If I go to Connington for a week to satisfy your scruples, you must give me one chance, just one, of seeing her while I am there. It shall not be in your house, and the whole town may know of it; and you may consult Mr. and Mrs. Blake if you like. You have heard us talk of the fête that is to be given at Connington when my pupil Walter Neale comes of age. I have leave to invite all Oldbury to it if I like. You must promise to come to Connington that day and bring her. Among so many people even your conscience cannot imagine an objection to our meeting. Promise this. It is a bargain, is it not?" Stephen stretched out his hand. "Come, you must allow it is very good

of me to consent to go away. If you could but understand how I hate the idea—what a sacrifice it is. There, don't you hear her coming downstairs? I do. You have not time to get up another scruple. Promise to bring her to Connington."

"I am sure I hope I shall not be doing very wrong," Miss Berry said, and Elsie opened the door and entered just as their hands were clasped to seal the bargain. She wondered what they could have been shaking hands about, and felt somewhat disconcerted and a little hurt at the notion that they had manoeuvred her out of the room in order that they might have a private conversation—perhaps about her.

"The rest of the evening passed very uncomfortably. Stephen stayed another hour, though Miss Berry kept giving him little hints to go, and showed distinctly enough that she was in no mood to enjoy his company. She let her knitting drop from her fingers, and every now and then interrupted herself in the middle of a sentence to turn round and stare with a bewildered air at Elsie, as if some extraordinary change had passed over her while she was out of the room, or as if her own eyes had been opened to see something in her they had never perceived before. Embarrassed by her scrutiny Elsie sat demurely winding worsted at the work-table behind the door, and resisted all Stephen's attempts to draw her into conversation.

By and bye a chance remark revealed to Elsie that Stephen was thinking of leaving Oldbury for a whole week, the last week of her visit, every day of which she had been reckoning on and trying to lengthen out in her thoughts, as an indefinite period beyond which she need not look. He was going to throw away the whole week as if it were nothing. Well, of course, it was nothing to him. He had plenty of pleasant weeks to do as he liked with, and was going to spend this, no doubt, with friends he preferred very much to any one in Oldbury.

Elsie was glad that the skein of red worsted proved very full of complicated knots. Her difficulties with it accounted for her silence, and for her having to stoop her head close over her work, and wink away some moisture that staring at the tangles so persistently brought into her eyes.

At last, when Miss Berry's patience was nearly worn out, and there had been a dead silence in the room for at least ten minutes, Stephen jumped up suddenly, walked across the room, and wished Elsie good night. He said something about hoping

to see her at Connington in a day or two, but Elsie did not choose to ask any questions ; if he really cared to see her, he would stay in Oldbury. She held out her hand with the worsted ball in it for him to shake, and the next minute he was gone, and she wondered how it had all passed so quickly.

Miss Berry was provokingly alert and talkative when she returned from shutting the hall-door.

"My dear, I thought he never would go," she said ; "I was so relieved when he got up at last, for I really hardly could keep my eyes open. I suppose he liked sitting there watching you wind that skein of red worsted. Dear, dear, how extraordinary young people are, when we might all have been in our beds an hour ago ! It is a comfort to know that we shall not have the same kind of thing another evening."

It had certainly been an uncomfortable evening ; yet Elsie did not get the same consolation, from the certainty that it could not be repeated, that Miss Berry evidently found.

CHAPTER XX.

SUMMER RAIN.

STEPHEN PIERREPOINT took his departure early next morning, and Miss Berry allowed herself to stand at the window to watch him drive off from the Rectory door.

"It is the basket pony-chaise they have brought round," she informed Elsie. "The servant is putting his luggage in the back seat. He is going to drive himself to Connington. The relatives of a college friend of his have quite lately bought the place, and gone to live at the old Hall there, which has been empty so long. Neale is the name. There was a Miss Connington, an heiress, who married a Mr. Neale a long time ago. I remember hearing of the marriage, though the Conningtons were thoroughly country people, and had nothing to do with Oldbury. Ah, there's the Rector himself come out on the doorstep to see his son drive off! He looks extremely well, and in good spirits this morning. He is rubbing his hands just as any of us might do if we were particularly pleased about anything. As for Steenie, so far as one can judge by his face——; but if young people will sit up unreasonably late over night, one can't wonder at their looking a little pale and out of sorts in the morning. He is glancing up at our house, my dear; if you would like to stand quite behind me, and take a peep at the carriage, I don't think there would be any harm. The boy who sits behind is Caroline's second cousin. I got him the place myself; and I have no doubt it would gratify you to see how well he looks in his new livery."

Elsie resisted the temptation of looking at Caroline's second cousin, and went on diligently copying a water-colour sketch Cecil had lent her, though Miss Berry could not compliment

her on the progress she had made, when she came and looked over her shoulder an hour afterwards.

It began to rain before twelve o'clock, and went on raining all the rest of the day. Miss Berry spent a good deal of time at the window, calculating how thoroughly wet a person must get in driving from Oldbury to Connington in such weather. Caroline celebrated her triumph over intruders by putting on a pair of high pattens, and walking in them up and down stairs, and in and out of the wet yard continually all through the afternoon, filling the house with gusts of wet wind as she came and went, and making the click-clack of her restless feet audible everywhere.

"I did venture to say a word about her staying in bed all yesterday," Miss Berry acknowledged penitently; "and so she has just put on her pattens, and I suppose she will walk about in them till bed-time. My dear, we must bear it. Every one has his faults; and though you would not think it from her behaviour, Caroline is truly attached to me, and would not leave me when Mrs. Lutridge herself offered her better wages than I can afford, to go and live with her on the hill."

In the afternoon there came a knock at the door; but it was only Mrs. Lutridge's servant bringing a letter and parcel. Miss Berry's face flushed a little uncomfortably as she read.

"My dear, this is one of Mrs. Lutridge's kind, or rather, I should say, faithful letters. 'I have always dealt faithfully with you,' she writes; and certainly I must do her the justice to say that she never does fail to tell me anything disagreeable that she thinks it better for me to know. She has sent us some profitable reading to occupy our afternoons, that we may have no excuse in future for encouraging the visits of idle young men. This thick volume is, I see, a memoir of Mrs. Hawkes, the wife of an excellent Baptist minister. It has a preface by her husband, dedicated to his second wife. My dear, as you don't seem to be getting on with your drawing, would you mind reading a little of it aloud to me at once? I daresay we both want it. We have, perhaps, been a little too happy lately, and have let ourselves be carried away by all the pleasant society we have had. This seems just the kind of work to bring one down to what dear Mrs. Lutridge would call a properly serious frame."

Elsie took the book and read industriously for an hour or so. The words flowed in right order from her lips; but she would have fared badly if Mrs. Lutridge had come in and cross-

questioned her on Mrs. Hawkes' history. When Miss Berry was fairly sent to sleep at last, she climbed on to the window-seat, rubbed the dew from the panes, and looked across the road into the Rectory sitting-room, where a low burning fire shone like a beacon across the wet dimness of the street. She fancied she was really very sad as she watched the rain-drops chasing each other down the window-panes, and caught glimpses of Cecil's shadow on the wall of the opposite house. She made a sort of play-tragedy of contrasting this evening with previous ones, putting it to herself as if she really believed that the sunshine would never come back to her again, nor the smiles on the faces of friends she chose to think had turned away from her. And all the time there dwelt at the bottom of her heart a strange, sweet, fearful certainty of a swift, coming joy, too dazzling to be looked at, which she thought it best to thrust out of sight, and keep at bay with shadows of imaginary sorrow. In after times she often looked back with a sort of envy of herself, as the recollection rose of that dim, dreary, pleasant, nonsensically sad afternoon.

In spite of foreboding, sunshine came back the next day, and very little progress was made in Mrs. Hawkes' Memoirs during the remaining days of Elsie's visit. Cecil set herself decidedly against the reading, and made a point of rushing in with a letter from Connington, or some exciting news about the festivities in preparation there, just as Elsie got out the book to begin.

Even Mrs. Lutridge recovered her good-humour, and condescended to show a certain grim approbation of Elsie when she met her on Sunday morning in the Rectory garden, where it was an Oldbury custom for some of the most favoured of the congregation to repair between services, to pace up and down the gravel walks, and enjoy the privilege of complimenting the Rector on his morning's sermon.

Elsie had never made one of the privileged procession before; and she was a good deal surprised when Mrs. Lutridge claimed her as her companion, and made her walk in state under the lime-trees among the magnates of the town, while the humbler people scattered themselves in groups about the garden. Cecil did the honours of the great mulberry tree in the middle of the grass plot, and offered leaves full of purple fruit to sulky Richard Lutridge, who stood swinging his cane in the sunshine, and savagely eyeing Elsie's grey dress as it flitted up and down beside Mrs. Lutridge's purple satin under the trees; and Mrs. Adams and the Miss Tomkinsons relieved their minds after the

solemnity of the service by counting the over-ripe apricots and golden-drop plums on the kitchen garden wall, and animadverting on the wastefulness of the Rectory servants who had neglected to gather them before the rain.

Even with Mrs. Lutridge's voice buzzing in her ears, Elsie had time to think what a sunny spot the Rectory garden was, and to congratulate herself very fervently on being there, she herself actually released at last from the sentence of banishment which had seemed to come upon her one well remembered day of her childhood, and permitted to feast her eyes on objects which some people saw every day.

Cecil Russel came up to her, and drew her aside when the other visitors were leaving the garden.

"I want to show you something," she said, leading the way to a glass door which opened on to the grass plot behind the house. "Come in."

"To the house?" said Elsie, drawing back; "but I have never been inside the Rectory in my life."

"It is time to begin then;" and as Elsie still hesitated, Cecil went in first, and drew her across the threshold, giving her, as she entered, a quick, strange, smiling look, which somehow made Elsie's heart beat very fast.

"There, you are in. Look round and remember some day that I brought you here first. It is a dismal room enough, and wants something pretty to come in and brighten it at last."

"It looks very bright from the outside," said Elsie. "Ask Miss Berry how often she looks towards that window."

"Well, come a little this way, to the right; that is what I want to show you!"

It was a picture, before which a curtain of green silk hung. Cecil raised the curtain, and Elsie saw a full-length portrait, in a white bridal dress, with a bright, winning face, whose full blue eyes seemed to her fancy to rest considerably on her.

"You know who it is, of course," said Cecil.

"Yes," said Elsie softly; "I almost wonder you dare let me see it."

"I was told to show it to you; or rather I think I was to let it—her—see you. Bring Elsie Blake into the library after church, some one said, and take her up to my mother's picture."

Cecil dropped the curtain, and the two girls stood silent for a moment, with a sort of reverent hush upon them. The sound of a bell ringing roused Elsie.

"Let me go now," she said; "though you are so kind, I feel that I ought not to be here."

"I am keeping a promise," said Cecil; "and as you are here I should like to show you another of our household gods—this folding screen; my cousin and I made it years ago, when I spent a summer in Oldbury. We did all the drawings ourselves, and most of them are meant for portraits of Oldbury people. That little girl with long curls and a straight nose is always you. You fill up half the screen. I used to get cross at your coming into everything. I can remember arguing vehemently that my snub-nosed face might sometimes be allowed to figure on the persons of our fairy princesses and heroines; but no, Steenie always found excellent reasons for putting you in the place of honour, and leaving me, as I am there, an insignificant little servant, in the corner. He was quite right. An artist putting us two into a picture would assign the same places to us now."

"How can you say so!" cried Elsie; "to me it seems just the contrary. You are always bright and dainty, with everything about you complete like a picture, and I look grey and dowdy—a shadow beside you."

"Your dress beside my dress, not you beside me," said Cecil laughing. "I will tell you how it is. You are that beautifully illuminated missal on the book-shelf in an old vellum binding, and I am this common little prayer-book—all daubed over with crimson and gold. No one in their senses would doubt which was best worth looking at."

"I won't stay to hear you disparage yourself," cried Elsie, moving on. "Besides," she added, pausing and looking up into Cecil's face as they were crossing the garden again, "after all, our bodies are not you and me. They are only binding, too, and it is what is inside that makes the real difference."

"Perhaps," said Cecil; "but still I think it must be very pleasant to be such a well-bound soul as you are. It makes all the book such pleasant reading for every one. Good-bye—I am coming in to-morrow to have some more talk over the Connington fête, and settle what you are to wear on that occasion."

Miss Berry's curiosity was evidently greatly excited by Cecil's private conference with Elsie. In the long bright afternoon, when she had drawn down the window blinds to shut out intrusive sights, and settled herself with a great show of determination to study Mrs. Hawkes' memoir, her wonder came so strong upon her that she could not refrain from interrupting the reading continually with remarks that had no connection

with that worthy lady's sentiments. It was clearly her own biography and Elsie's, and not that of good Mrs. Hawkes, on which her thoughts were running.

"I don't think I ever was taken into the Rectory through the window in such a familiar way myself," she observed; "but I quite well remember one Sunday long ago when Mrs. Lutridge and her sister went in so. I think they had asked to borrow Cruden's Concordance, and Mr. Pierrepont took them into the library to look for the work—to be sure! what conclusions we all drew! and they thought a good deal of the circumstance themselves. I can see Mrs. Lutridge's face, as if it were yesterday, just as she came back into the garden, glancing round as if she were making up her mind what alterations she would advise her sister to set on foot by and bye. How strange it is to look back and think of all the plans and the changes, and how one thing follows another! Children one has played with grow up, and things begin to happen to them—dear! dear! and one's own life has been going on in the same quiet way all the time."

"I should not like to think my life would always go on very quietly," said Elsie; "I think I should like to have a very busy life, full of events and changes. I hope it will be so with me."

"Perhaps it may, my dear. That was what I was saying. Children grow up, and their independent lives begin, and sometimes one feels—I am not grumbling, for I have had a very happy life myself—but now and then one feels a little left out. I used to expect changes to come to me. Other people had them. They married, or took long journeys, or had fortunes left them, or something; and when I heard about it, I had my little hopes and plans too. I was as foolish as any other young girl once. One year my father took us all to the sea. That was a great event. My sister Louisa met the gentleman she married afterwards while we were away; and the very next spring I had a valentine on Valentine's Day. It's a foolish thing to remember, but I do remember it. I spent a good deal of time puzzling to find out who could have sent it. 'Now it is all going to begin with me as it does with other people,' I said; but, my dear, it did not begin, it stopped. I found out that it was only Letitia Lutridge who had written the verses to make fun of me. She could make fun in those days. We were never able to afford another journey. My sister married, and my father died, and I have gone on living alone in this little house in Oldbury ever since."

"It sounds very dreary," said Elsie.

"But, my love, it has not been dreary," Miss Berry answered in a brisk voice. "Why, I have had the map, and such excellent friends and neighbours—dearest Mrs. Lutridge taking, I am sure, the most disinterested trouble about all my concerns; and then such a privileged place as Oldbury to live in! I should be a discontented person indeed if I did not consider my lot a singularly favoured one. As for journeys and changes I shall have my share of them too in the end. There's one journey and one change that I certainly shall not be left out of; and it's enough to make one's life interesting to be sure of that. Can it be five o'clock striking already, and we have hardly advanced a page? I am afraid my tongue is, as dearest Mrs. Lutridge always says, a terrible snare to me. How I could forget the sacredness of the day so far as to refer to a valentine, and speak of hopes and thoughts which are after all so merely worldly. Let us go back to those excellent reflections of Mrs. Hawkes you were beginning to read, my love, and try to profit by them. It strikes me she must have been just such another uncompromising person as Mrs. Lutridge, and one hopes that *her* friends and neighbours did not fail to value her as she deserved."

Elsie read, and Miss Berry sat bolt upright, with a pains-taking resolve to be edified written on her face, and a golden river of sunshine flowed into the room through the crevices of the blind, glanced over Elsie's bent head, and lit up the grotesque figures on the wall. Sweet scents of late mignonette and full-blown magnolia blossoms stole over the Rectory garden wall and crept round Elsie, whispering words in her ear that a good deal disturbed her understanding of Mrs. Hawkes' maxims; till at last the church bells began their summons to the Oldbury people to come to evening service;—seven sweet chimes, falling, rising, low down, up, up, to the sky, with a joyous palpitating motion, like the beating of a lark's wings, carrying Elsie's thoughts with them, up to dizzy, dazzling heights of joy and hope, and rapturous consciousness of love given and returned; and down, down, softly, harmoniously falling, plucked back by maiden humility and shyness, and a wonder whether "such thoughts," as Miss Berry had mysteriously phrased it, *were* merely wordly matters, unfit for a sacred day, or true, God-sent awakenings of the soul into fuller life, as the sunshine and the flower-scents and the music seemed to be saying to her.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE NEALES.

THE fête at Connington, to which Miss Berry had received an invitation, was to take place on the very day before that fixed for Mr. and Mrs. Blake's return home. A few months before Elsie would have been greatly agitated at the mere thought of entering a house owned by any one of the name of Neale. Now the once absorbing thought had fallen into the background; and instead of being anxious to discover a connexion between her own unknown relations and Cecil's and Steenie's friends, she avoided asking questions or listening to talk about them, in dread of hearing something that would make it seem right for her to give up the expedition. Margaret's letters since they parted had been short and hurried, with the least possible information in them, and Elsie had felt considerable restraint in composing her answers. She had never been used to letter writing, and there was hardly anything she could say about her present mode of life that might not annoy Margaret. She had kept Cecil's and Stephen's names out of her letters hitherto; and now, though she had many misgivings about paying this visit to Connington without first asking Margaret's consent, she let the days slip by till it was too late, before she could make up her mind to enter into explanations that would be difficult to her.

Cecil had several secret conferences with Miss Berry on the day before the fête; and when Elsie returned to her room after their evening walk, her eyes fell on some articles of dress spread out on her bed that looked very unlike any of her own belongings—a light silk dress, of a pretty rosebud pattern, a white lace mantle, and a shady hat trimmed with rosebuds.

Cecil gradually emerged from behind an arm chair, where she had hidden herself, before Elsie had done staring in surprise at them. There was an apologetic look on her face as she came forward.

"It is only the very outsidest binding you see," she said. "You won't mind putting on a silk cover instead of a brown holland one just for once to please me." I made it nearly all myself ——"

"For me! How kind you are, and how clever!"

"Louise helped, of course, and you must not praise my work till you have tried it on. Be good, and let me dress you now just to see how I have succeeded."

"Now turn round and look at yourself," Cecil said when she had completed her operations. It was as much the pleasureable excitement lending a new colour to her cheeks, and light to her eyes, as the alteration in the dress that made the radiant reflection in the depths of the glass seem so unfamiliar to Elsie.

"It is not Elsie Blake, it is 'Alice Pamela Neale,'" she said to herself; and with the thought a little shadow came flickering down, and put out the light in the face, and she knew herself again, and turned away from the glass rather quickly.

"Well, what is it?" cried Cecil. "Why are you so soon tired of seeing how beautiful you are? If the glass would only look back at me like that, should I ever be tired of standing before it? Have you discovered, with dearest Mrs. Lutridge, that pink is a worldly colour?"

"Oh no; only I can't get out of myself so far all at once. People would not know me."

"That is the treat you are going to give me," said Cecil. "It was not to please you I worked this hole in my forefinger; it was for the gratification of seeing dearest Mrs. Lutridge wrinkle up her brows, and all the six dear Miss Lutridges turn pale with envy—to say nothing of a certain grateful glance I shall get from a friend's eyes, and the sudden blaze of pleasure that, I know, will come over his face when he catches the first glimpse of us."

"But I shan't like all that," said Elsie.

"Oh yes, you will. You will find you are quite suitably dressed when you get to Connington, and you won't think any more about it. The Oldbury people will be in the minority there. You and Miss Berry belong to our party, and we shall keep you with us all day. The Neales are old friends of ours. Steenie has told you all about them, of course?"

"No," said Elsie hesitatingly. "I have heard him speaking of them to Miss Berry sometimes, but I do not know much."

"Steenie's account would have been more *couleur de rose* than mine. I can't say I feel much interest in any of the family, though the story of their coming back to Connington is rather a pretty one. Our acquaintance began by Steenie's bringing the nephew—this Walter Neale, whose coming of age we are to celebrate to-morrow—to spend his Easter holidays with us in London. He was a miserably shy, unlucky kind of boy then, and I used to admire Steenie's humanity in putting up with him, till he confessed to me lately that he took a sort of liking to him first because there was something in his face that put him in mind of you—of you at church looking frightened of Mrs. Luttridge."

"But is there a likeness?" said Elsie.

"Well, yes; I am afraid I must confess that I have been struck with it once or twice myself lately."

"My mother's name was Neale," said Elsie in a low voice.

"Don't try to make out a relationship. I had rather you did not. I don't choose that Walter Neale should have you for a cousin."

"You dislike him then," said Elsie almost resentfully.

"Do I? No, I think not quite. There is really nothing to dislike about him. He is only horribly shy, and morbid, and full of fancies, which my father says is the result of the fuss that his mother has made over him, and the unnatural gloom of his home. She is a widow, and has the most miserable face I ever saw."

"I think he must be like me," said Elsie; "I wish you did not dislike him."

"Come, I will confess. There is a mean kind of pride at the bottom of my enmity. Ever since the old Eton holiday times, when I taught him to tie his neckerchiefs properly, and insisted on his walking into a room straight instead of sideways, he has had a provoking spaniel-like affection for me, and I am ashamed of it. I look into his meek face as he sidles up, dying to be able to say something to ingratiate himself with me, and I say to myself, 'There now, just because you are such a sharp, talkative, critical personage, and fancy yourself somewhat intellectual, that's the only sort of man who will ever take to you.' Don't look so shocked, Elsie. It is myself I despise, not poor, unlucky Walter Neale."

"I don't in the least understand why you should despise either."

"The mother and uncle are worse than he is to me," Cecil went on, "for it is not so easy to snub them. They have quite made up their minds that I am precisely the energetic, pushing little personage who is best fitted to fight dear, sensitive Walter's battles, and drag him with some credit through the world. That is the rôle in life they have assigned to me; and so they give this grand fête at Connington to-morrow, and permit me to bid all Oldbury to it in order to dazzle me with their new splendour, and show me what grand things are in store for me if I choose to take them."

"So this is your fête," said Elsie; "and you have been thinking of nothing but of dressing me up for it."

"No, it is yours. I had declined to have anything to do with it, till Steenie thought of having some of the Oldbury people invited for the sake of including Miss Berry and you. Then I gave way. I hope I shall not have cause to repent. My business to-morrow will be to keep a strict watch over Grandmamma; for if I am not at hand to contradict every word that comes out of her mouth, she will talk poor Mrs. Neale into dreadful misconception of my state of mind."

"What is Mrs. Neale like?"

"She is a white frightened mouse of a woman. She was left a widow many years ago, and I believe her husband met with his death in some shocking way. I never heard the rights of the story. She has a scared look in her eyes still, as if she had never got over the fright of it. I dread her. 'She looks in my face,' as the song says, 'till my heart is like to break.' It passes her comprehension that any one can have the heart to deny her fatherless boy anything. It strikes me as strange that the uncle, who is a very different sort of person, should have just the same anxious, pitiful tenderness over him."

"Tell me about the uncle."

"One admires him. He has been everything to the meek little widow and her son. They were poor after the husband's death, and he has worked for them for years, and now at last bought back this property at Connington, which originally belonged to Mrs. Neale, and which I suppose her husband squandered or let himself be cheated out of. The other two are afraid of him. He is a sort of person one feels one never comes within a mile of mentally, yet one is interested in him. Do you know, I believe he has really suffered more than even the frightened little widow; there is a look on his face sometimes that makes me suspect he has gone through a far more

terrible struggle. If it had been he who cared for me now ; but I expect it is about a century since he took the trouble of knowing one woman from another."

"Shall I see him to-morrow ?" asked Elsie eagerly."

"Of course you shall if you please ; I will take care of that. But I wish I had not told you this melancholy history. You have got your frightened 'Walter Neale' look on ; and you will be pitying the Neales all to-morrow instead of enjoying yourself. Come, forget it. Look what a splendid glow there is in the west ! We shall have perfect weather for the fête, and you will shine out upon us in the white dress, won't you ?"

Elsie took the rosebud hat from her head and began to twist it round and round on her hand mechanically. Could she wear it ? If Cecil's Mr. Neale were the friend who sent the books to "little Alice," would it be best to come before him looking as she had seen herself in the glass half an hour before, or clad in the sombre guise Margaret had imposed so long ? As she pondered her eyes fixed themselves on a rosebud in the hat she was holding, and all at once a picture rose up before her mind of Margaret sitting with a hat something like this in her hand snipping out the rosebuds, and of the expression on her face afterwards when she had knelt down beside her bed. The sorrow on it—the deep humility on it—it came before her with an understanding of Margaret's feelings she had not had at the time. She put the hat down, and began slowly to undo the fastenings of the dainty silk dress. Such things were not for her—she was certain of it ; and though she knew nothing of Margaret's reasons in putting them away from her, she resolved to remain faithful to her old habits.

"You have let the last gleam of sunlight go while you have been meditating," said Cecil. "I had no idea you could look so solemn. What have you been reading in that horrid Hawkes' book to make you think it wicked to put on a silk dress ?"

"It is not that. Don't be angry with me, Cecil. I can't explain it to you ; I don't even quite understand my own feelings ; but I must go in my own dress if I go to Connington at all. I will stay away if you think I shall be out of place there ; and indeed I am afraid that would be best."

"I should like to see myself going without you !" cried Cecil. "If you put it in that way, of course there is no more to be said."

"You are angry with me. I am so sorry," said Elsie.

There was a short silence, and then Cecil took Elsie's face between her two hands, and turned it to the window.

"Tears, Flower Aspect! nay, that will never do. I won't have my rosebuds watered with such dew as that. There, take off that thing and give it me. I will fold it away, and my moment's vexation with it, and never think of either again. By to-morrow evening I shall no doubt be able to allow that you are right, and that the precious illuminated missal ought always to keep to its own quaint vellum binding."

CHAPTER XXII.

MRS. LUTRIDGE AT FAULT.

So many of the Oldbury people had (through Cecil's intervention) received invitations to the archery fête at Connington), that the little town wore quite a gay appearance on the morning of the appointed day, with carriages setting out on the Connington road, and groups of pedestrians who did not own any conveyance wending their way to the station at the bottom of the town.

Miss Berry and Elsie were to go by rail; and when they were quite ready to start, to Elsie's dismay Miss Berry fell into a painful state of indecision respecting which train Cecil had advised them to take.

"Ought we to try for the 11·15 train?" she said in a very bewildered tone as she turned over the leaves of her "Bradshaw." "But, my dear, there is not an 11·15 train; it is 11·5. And Caroline has chosen to pop out to the baker's, and will not be back in time. Shall we say 1·30? But stay, that does not stop at Connington at all; it would carry us straight through to Bristol. How providential that I made the discovery! My dear, I am getting puzzled, for all the other trains end in dots, and don't seem to me ever to get anywhere."

"I wish I could help you," said Elsie; "but I have never made a railway journey in my life."

"And it is a much safer thing to stay at home," said Miss Berry rather eagerly. "My dear, do you know I think we shall have to give it up? The Adams's passed the window some time ago. Perhaps it is an intimation that you and I shall be best at home to-day. I have, I confess, all along had my scruples; and then the risk of being taken on by the train unawares to Bristol, or any of those large towns, is so very

appalling ! You will not mind taking off your walking things, and spending the day quietly with me, my dear, will you ? ”

Elsie turned away towards the window to hide her eyes as she slowly untied her bonnet strings. It was a disappointment. Oh, it was a disappointment ! And Miss Berry took up her feather brush and began whisking the china ornaments on the mantel-shelf with as much composure as if no more exciting than ordinary way of passing the morning had ever been contemplated. Elsie went on looking out of the window, just not to see her do it. The streets were almost as empty as usual now ; there was nothing to be seen but a few urchins playing truant from school, and some groups of servants standing out on the door-steps—Oldbury fashion—to exchange comments on their departing masters and mistresses.

Presently the scene enlarged ; a carriage drove rapidly up the street and stopped at Miss Berry's door. The children huzzaed, the servants disappeared down the areas. Elsie started away from the window, and the next moment Miss Berry let her handsomest Chinese mandarin fall to the ground in the nervous tremor that came over her when Stephen Pierrepont walked into the room.

The colour rushed back into Elsie's cheeks, and a gleam of sunshine came to her dewy eyes, and she had no need of the rosebud dress just then to heighten her radiant beauty. Stephen went up to her first, while Miss Berry was picking up the mandarin ; and as they shook hands, and their eyes met, they both discovered (what people sometimes do discover who have been thinking a great deal of each other during an absence) that their intimacy had made a great start forwards in the interval, and that they met in quite a different stage of acquaintanceship from that in which they had parted. They had all the right which reluctant parting and eager meeting again confer, to be very close friends, and rejoice in each other's presence.

Miss Berry's exclamations of astonishment were not as much heeded as they might have been for a minute or so ; and when Stephen proceeded to explain that he had driven in from Connington for the express purpose of taking her and Miss Blake back with him, she gave up all hope of escape, though she continued to urge objections to the expedition, while Steenie was half dragging her to the door.

“ My dear !—my old brown silk—I am not prepared for such a conspicuous position. Am I really to get in here ? Such a handsome, comfortable carriage—it seems almost a sin ; and

there is good Mr. Adams still a little stiff with rheumatism, and Mrs. Adams so inconveniently stout and large,—don't you think you could overtake them before they reach the station, and offer to drive them to Connington instead of us? The satisfaction to your feelings of doing a kindness to such worthy people would repay you for any little disappointment you might feel about leaving us behind."

"Yes, I daresay," said Steenie demurely; "but there are the ponies' feelings to be considered as well as mine, and I have promised them that they shall not take anything back to Connington stouter or larger than yourself and Miss Blake. You should mix a little justice with your charity, Elderberry."

"Dear me!" Miss Berry exclaimed, when they were fairly started and bowling easily along the road; "but this is a luxurious way of travelling. If we could but (without cruelty to the ponies) share the convenience with all our friends, and if I were sure we should not dash past the dear Lutridges on the road, there would be nothing left to wish for."

Once clear of the town, Steenie, to Miss Berry's relief, showed no further disposition to dash along. The ponies subsided into a gentle trot, and Steenie let the reins hang on their necks, while he turned a radiant face round, and leant back to converse comfortably with the occupants of the back seat.

"There is no hurry," he said. "I am not sure that I shall take you to Connington at all. We will drive about by-lanes all day, and make a picnic of our own. It would be such a nice adventure for Oldbury to talk about, and I have you both quite in my power, you see."

"My dear, you surely would not think of such a thing!" cried Miss Berry, in alarm.

"I don't know. You deserve to be punished for the treachery you were meditating against me, Elderberry. I saw it in your face the instant I entered your room. You intended to break your promise, and shirk coming to Connington to-day. Now, was it not so?"

"You see," Miss Berry answered, rather falteringly, "I had been feeling doubtful; and when Caroline chose to pop out to the baker's just as we ought to have been starting, it seemed so like a leading that we were not to go, that I thought I was justified——"

"In breaking your word. You thought you had got a hint direct from heaven to do that, did you? Well, it only shows to what bewilderment a long course of Hawkes' memoirs, and

subservience to Mrs. Lutridge, can bring even your honest conscience."

"My dear Stephen," said Miss Berry with a little air of dignity, "if only you would be so kind as just to put it down to my own weakness and incapacity when you see me doing anything wrong, and not charge it on Mrs. Lutridge, or on any good person's teaching, I should be very much obliged to you, and you would not have so much idle, inconsiderate speech on your conscience as I sadly fear you have now."

"Well, we will not quarrel to-day. Forgive me, Elderberry. I will take any view of your character you please, and find Mrs. Lutridge an angel if she will only keep out of our way."

"My dear, I never said she was anything but an imperfect creature like the rest of us; and you know nothing about angels."

"Ah, but I do. I have seen several in my life—several angels, and one saint. She is an acquaintance of yours, Elderberry, and you have behaved very badly to her ever since I can remember. Sticking fronts on the top of her head, maligning her before all her neighbours, forcing her to bow down to monstrous idols; but you can't quite hide her auriolate—at least not from some people's eyes."

"I suppose it amuses you to puzzle me to-day; but don't you think you had better turn round and attend to where we are going? The road is a little broken here, and the ponies are getting uncomfortably near the ditch, and seem to know that no one is thinking of them."

They had turned away from the chalk hills now towards the richer, better wooded lowlands, through which the river dawdled and curved, and gathered strength for its onward journey. It was the perfection of a September day; there was no wind, but the air seemed to throb gently with the fulness of the sunshine. The motionless trees, and golden shocks of corn leaning against each other in the fields, and the quiet groups of cattle on the distant hill sides, stood out with a clear-cut distinctness of outline against the deep cloudless blue, such as can be seen only on a few perfect autumn days.

Sometimes they bowled swiftly along in a charmed silence, pleasanter than speech, with only just time for Elsie to catch entrancing glimpses of shining reaches of the river between the trees, or of the low hanging treasures of the hedgerows they passed between, or of a row of harvesters putting in the first sickles in a field of standing corn; sometimes, when they came

to a shady upward-sloping bit of road, the ponies were allowed to choose their own pace, and Stephen turned round and the talk began again.

"This is Connington village," said Stephen at last; "and under this quaint old archway is the entrance into the grounds. Have you ever, either of you, been here before? The last owner was very unsociable, and would not let the place be shown."

"No," said Miss Berry; "but I was here long ago—in Mr. Connington's time. I remember his death; he left a little daughter. The place was let during her minority, and sold long afterwards when people were beginning to hope she would come back here to live."

"Mrs. Neale is the daughter. She was defrauded of her property by an unjust guardian, and now all these years afterwards, when the story of her wrongs has died out of people's minds, her Quixotic brother-in-law buys back the place and hands it over to her son. Just look round, that you may appreciate the action properly. That's the old manor-house covered with trellised roses and magnolia to its gabled roof. Rather a magnificent birthday present to be given away to-day, is it not?"

"It will be a very happy day to the giver, I should think," said Elsie.

"A proud day, I believe, unless something goes wrong and spoils it. I never saw any of the Neales happy, and don't believe it's in them. I think it's all a mistake myself, and that my friend would be better without such a weight of obligation laid upon him. But now what will you do? shall I drive you quite up to the house, or will you get down here? The archery is going on under the trees, and most of the guests are assembled there by this time."

As Miss Berry's only anxiety was to slip in among the other visitors in the least conspicuous manner, she chose to alight at once; and they were soon all three strolling through the beautiful gardens towards the spot where the targets stood.

"That is Walter Neale just preparing to shoot," said Stephen; "I will bring him up to you by and bye."

"Does he—did Mr. and Mrs. Neale hear that I was coming to-day?" asked Elsie anxiously. "I mean, did you ever mention my name to them?"

Steenie looked a little embarrassed.

"One is not in a hurry to mention the name one has oftenest in one's thoughts," he said in a low voice that escaped Miss Berry's ears.

"I asked," Elsie went on hurriedly, "because I believe my grandmother knows a Mr. Neale, and if this should be the same it might be awkward—he might be surprised."

"You will perhaps never come across him all day. Ah! Mrs. Lutridge has spied us out, and my father—there is no help for it. They are beckoning, and Miss Berry sees it. Our fate is sealed."

While Mrs. Lutridge was cross-examining Miss Berry on the mode of their conveyance from Oldbury, Elsie's quick ears caught a sentence or two which passed between Mr. Pierrepont and his son.

"What a long time you have been away," Mr. Pierrepont began. "There were many inquiries for you. You were wanted for the shooting."

"Oh no, sir, there are plenty of people to shoot. I told them I should not be here for the first hour or so."

"At all events you have been missed. Here are all our friends from Oldbury who were invited at yours and Cecil's instigation, and no one to show them any attention."

"Is not Cecil somewhere about? Besides, I have been looking after two of our friends all the morning—the only two for whose entertainment I hold myself responsible; the rest are Cecil's charge."

Mr. Pierrepont glanced round, and Elsie felt that his eye dwelt on her.

"Miss Berry and Miss Blake!"

There was great irritation in the tone of his voice as he pronounced the two names, and something rather like defiance in Steenie's as he repeated them after him.

"Yes, Miss Berry and Miss Blake; I have brought them over from Oldbury in Mrs. Neale's carriage. I thought they would prefer it to coming in the train."

"Well," Mr. Pierrepont continued after a moment's pause, during which he seemed to have recovered himself. "I have no older friend than good Miss Berry—she deserves every consideration; and since you think you have already discharged all duties to our neighbours for the day, suppose you come into the house with me. Colonel Seymour and Lady Mary have been asking about you. I want you to see them; they were your mother's friends."

"Time enough for them. They will come out on to the lawn soon, I daresay, and I shall see them," said Steenie coolly.

And then, as Miss Berry began to move again, he followed, stationing himself at Elsie's side. Elsie's face was burning crimson with vexation.

"Do go away, please," she said.

"Why should I?"

"Because your father wants you."

"No, he does not. It's all nonsense. I can see those people just as well any other time."

"Then he does not like you to be with us."

"Pray don't get that notion into your head; it's worse nonsense still. I shall find you seats where you can see everything that is going on before I leave you, at all events."

When the seats were found, Steenie still lingered, pointing out to Elsie their hosts, and the guests that were not Oldbury people.

"That tall man with his hands behind him standing there alone is old Neale—Gilbert Neale. He always stands like that, seemingly in the deepest of brown studies, as if he did not care for anything that was going on round him. Yet I expect he will know, at the end of the day, the exact amount of attention each of the county grandees has paid his nephew, and how many of her old friends have recognized Mrs. Neale."

"It is only for their sakes he cares, not for his own then?" said Elsie. "He is a very noble-looking man, like what I fancied him. I am glad you pointed him out to me."

"I see you are determined to make a hero of him. Well, he is something of the strong-willed, silent, compressed-lip type of personage than you ladies admire. I have studied the character in some of Cecil's new novels in the hope of forming myself on it to please you, but the last hero I met with has reduced me to despair. I find it recorded of him that on one occasion he ate his dinner in silence, save when he sternly motioned away a cruet-stand that had not been burnished to the proper pitch of brightness. I could not do that. I don't *think* I could hurl a maniac out of a railway carriage window, as this gentleman does in the last chapter; but I am *certain* I shall never arrive at the dignity of sternly motioning away anything."

"Or of eating your dinner or doing anything else in silence," said Elsie, smiling.

He moved away at last, and Elsie's eyes followed him till he had joined the group of archers under the trees. She noticed how eagerly Walter Neale came forward to meet him, and the increased animation his coming seemed to bring. Miss Berry pointed it out to her too, as if she were not already feeling it in her heart. Elsie had been used to fancy herself a sort of alien from happy people; and now for one so bright and popular to seek her out, to care so much for her company, it seemed too much, she could hardly believe it. It was a wonder that could bear any amount of pondering over, and so she drooped her eyes—afraid of where they would stray to—and sat musing in contented silence, till Miss Berry, who had nothing very particular to think about, grew restless in her conspicuous place, and insisted on making a move.

"Don't you think we have kept this comfortable seat too long," she said. "There are others still standing; and though Stephen Pierrepont is so kind, I can't feel that you and I are in our right places stuck up here under an awning among all the county people, while Mrs. Lutridge, I see, and the other Oldbury ladies, have only found a garden seat quite at the bottom of the lawn. If you don't object, my dear, it would make me happier to go and join them."

Miss Berry's voluntary abdication of her honours did not save her from some reproaches when she got among her friends.

"We thought we were not to see anything of you to-day, my dear," said the eldest Miss Tomkinson as she and Elsie approached the Oldbury group. "'Rather her than I,' I said to my sister when I saw you stuck up on the raised seats—your old brown silk between Lady Fox's velvet and Mrs. Wentworth's blue brocade. 'Some people like to be in grand company.' I said, 'and to be stared at; but for me, I prefer to walk about at my ease and smell the flowers.' That's what we Oldbury ladies have been invited out here to do to-day as far as I can make out, and very pleasant I am sure we find it, though we mayn't feel any obligation to those who take so little thought of our entertainment."

"My dear Miss Tomkinson, hush!" said Mrs. Lutridge with awful solemnity; "I blame myself. Yes," she continued, looking round with a full consciousness of the tremendous character of the admission she was making, "I consider *myself* to blame. I did not make sufficient inquiries into the nature of the entertainment before I consented to sanction it with my presence; and it being what it is, can I wonder that I feel out

of place? On the contrary, I pity those to whom such society is congenial. 'The friendship of the world,' my dear Miss Berry; but I have too often pointed out its consequences, and I fear with too little result, to need to dwell upon them now."

Mrs. Lutridge paused to take breath. She was undoubtedly a good deal excited; but it must in justice be allowed that she had weightier causes of discontent than the being left to find a garden seat for herself, while her humbler neighbours were made to sit in high places. Five of her daughters, for the sake of whose advancement she had possibly yielded a scruple or two, were standing exactly where they had taken up their position two hours before, carrying on a little languid flirtation, all five of them, with Mrs. Adams' fat hobbledohoy grandson, the only chevalier that their five new Balmoral hats and pink parasols had attracted into their neighbourhood; while pretty Miss Ursula, on whose chance of captivating the hero of the day her mother had perhaps speculated a little, had turned her back on the rest of the company, and for the last half-hour had been looking devoutly up into the face of the poorest and most ritualistic of the District Church curates, who was describing to her a vestment he had lately purchased to wear under his surplice till the Oldbury people were prepared for its open display.

"It will be an immense comfort to some of us to know that you have the right thing on, even if we may not see it," cried Miss Ursula enthusiastically, just as Mrs. Lutridge's sudden silence made her words audible.

Mrs. Lutridge would have liked to have jumped up and boxed their ears. As she could not do this, she re-opened her attack on Miss Berry.

"I blame myself, but I don't excuse those whose misrepresentations have drawn me into the snare. There are people whom a very little attention and flattery will delude, but I am thankful to say I am not one of them. Stephen Pierrepont and Miss Russel are wise in not wasting their assiduities on me. They don't venture to introduce me to their gay companions; they know I shall not be deterred from openly expressing to Mr. Pierrepont my disapproval of their engagement, which I regret to see is evidently drawing his son into a vortex of dissipation."

"Well, but do you know as to that," began Miss Berry timidly, "I think we have all been making a little mistake, and perhaps we had better not talk so loud about it here. Lady Fox and Mrs. Wentworth spoke very confidently to me just

now, and it seems, from what they say, that it is not Stephen Pierrepont at all that Miss Russel is going to marry, but that pale young man who has been standing behind her all the morning holding her arrows—Mr. Walter Neale, whose birthday we are keeping to-day.”

“Then I have been grossly deceived!” exclaimed Mrs. Lutridge, rising from her seat in awful anger; “and a most precious opportunity of bringing the young man under good influences has been thrown away. I cannot but believe there has been design in this; a design aimed at me and my family. Miss Berry, you have much to answer for. What may be the ultimate result of your deplorable imprudence I dare not think, but you may rest assured that no advantage will ensue to those” (with a withering glance at Elsie) “whom you have designed to advance by your machinations. I shall take the matter into my own hands; I shall act——”

Mrs. Lutridge's voice had risen during her harangue into something like a scream, which penetrated beyond the circle of her own immediate auditors. The five Misses Lutridge, not knowing on whom the storm was about to burst, flew apart in various directions like croqueted balls; young Adams took off his hat and wiped a cold perspiration from his forehead; the little curate hid behind Miss Ursula's ample crinoline; and Cecil, gaining a dim perception that something was amiss, threw down her arrows and ran across the lawn to the scene of action, followed by Walter Neale and one or two others who had been standing near her.

She descended on the disturbed elements like oil on troubled waters.

“Ah, I have found you all at last!” she exclaimed, smiling and holding out her hand to one and another. “Mrs. Lutridge, Mrs. Adams, Miss Tomkinson, what a delightfully shady spot you have chosen! If I had known you were all established here so comfortably, I certainly should not have stayed so long up there in the glare of the sun. Mrs. Lutridge, this is Stephen Pierrepont's friend and travelling companion, Mr. Walter Neale. He has heard a great deal about you. Now have you not, Mr. Neale? And he is most anxious for an introduction. He was saying just now that he was certain he could single you out from the crowd, my cousin has so often described you to him.”

Elsie looked up curiously at the sound of Walter Neale's name. A pale, regular-featured, fair-haired young man stepped

forward, raised his hat, made a sort of desperate gasp in the air instead of speech when Cecil appealed to him, and then stood in a nervous agony of silence, while Mrs. Lutridge, somewhat mollified, but swelling with suppressed rage, addressed some remarks to him. To cover his distress Cecil chattered on. "You do not condescend to interest yourself in the archery, but we have had a very good match. Miss Fox, the pretty Miss Fox, the member's daughter, has won the ladies' prize—such an exquisite bracelet! it is to be presented after luncheon. And see, everybody is crowding to the tent already. You had better all come with me that I may find you comfortable places. Miss Berry, Elsie, you ought not to be here. Stephen has gone to the upper end of the lawn to look for you; but as you are here, you had better follow me."

CHAPTER XXIII.

A RECOGNITION.

MISS BERRY and Elsie were the last of the party to reach the entrance to the tent, towards which Cecil led the way. Many of the guests had already entered, and were taking their seats at the long tables; others stood in groups round the door.

"Stay here," whispered Cecil to Elsie, "till I have taken Mrs. Lutridge and the rest of the Oldbury people in. I will come back for you and Miss Berry. You are to sit near us. We want you to hear the speeches. Don't stir till I come back."

The sun was shining full in Elsie's face, and in the hurry of starting in the morning she had forgotten her parasol. She put up her hand, as Cecil left her, to shade her eyes, and when the glare left them she perceived that the tall, grey-haired man, whom Steenie had pointed out as Gilbert Neale, was standing at a little distance from her looking at her intently.

He seemed to have broken off a conversation suddenly to stare at her, for a lady leaning on his arm looked up into his face with evident surprise.

The eyes that dwelt on Elsie's face were grave, inquiring eyes, with an expression of half recognition and sad wonder in them. Elsie would have turned away if she could, but there was something in the look that awed her into stillness. Her heart began to beat very quickly, a desperate wild courage came to her, such as sometimes comes to very timid people in moments of great agitation. She could hardly restrain herself from ending the painful pause by stepping forward before all the bystanders, holding out her hand, and saying, "Uncle Gilbert Neale, I am Elsie Blake; I am 'little Alice.'"

She felt as if she had escaped a danger when Cecil's voice approaching showed her the opportunity was passed.

"I half expected Stephen would have found you out before I got back, I have been so long making my way through the crowd. I shall turn Mr. Neale over to you, Elsie. Miss Alice Blake, Mr. Walter Neale."

The introduction passed in silence. Mr. Neale put out his arm, and Elsie timidly approached the tips of her fingers. Before she touched it, she felt her hand roughly seized from behind and drawn back, and the elder Mr. Neale thrust himself between them. He did not make any apology for his action, he scarcely seemed to notice the surprised looks his nephew and Cecil turned on him, but he kept firmly hold of Elsie's wrist, while with the other hand on his nephew's shoulder he pushed him away from her towards the tent door.

"I will take charge of this young lady, Miss Russel; pray, go on with Walter. I beg of you to go on; you are stopping the way," he said in a quick, decided voice.

Cecil had just time to turn round and make a little mutinous gesture of vexation towards Elsie, and then the pressure of the entering crowd bore her onwards. Elsie lost sight of her, and found herself alone with Mr. Neale. He loosened his grasp of her wrist as soon as Walter and Cecil had disappeared, but he did not offer her his arm or move forwards in the direction where other people were moving. He stood still and silent, his eyes fixed on the ground, and his face, which had grown deadly pale all at once, working with emotion, fierce anger, or terrible pain, Elsie could not tell which; but glancing at him, she felt very cold and sick and frightened, as looks of Margaret's had once or twice made her feel before.

"I think I had rather not go into the tent," she said falteringly; "I don't feel well. I will go and sit somewhere on the grass in the shade till Miss Berry comes back, and then I will go home."

He turned towards her at the sound of her voice, and still without a word to her took her by the hand, and led her through the press of entering guests back to the quieter part of the garden. When they were quite clear of the crowd, he stood still and looked at her again.

"You, then, are Alice—Blake?" he said.

"Elsie—I am Elsie," she answered, putting forward her usual name as a plea against the anger the other seemed so strangely to call up.

The contraction on his brow relaxed, but his lips trembled more than once as he said in a softer voice :

"You should not have come here to-day ; it was a great mistake. Your grandfather should have known better than to allow you to come here to-day."

"He did not know. He—they are all away from Oldbury, and I am staying with the lady who brought me here. I never go anywhere when they are at home," pleaded Elsie.

"That is right ; that is what I should have expected of them," he said, drawing her hand through his arm again, and preparing to walk in.

Elsie resisted, she was trembling so much. "I can't go any farther ; let me sit down here on the grass away from every one," she said.

"No ; you had better come on with me to the house. Mrs. Neale might see you there, and that must not be. I will take you into my private room, and as soon as the party breaks up send your friends to you there."

"At once—let me go at once!" Elsie exclaimed, a little flush of indignation rising at the harshness with which she was treated.

"You had better consent to wait. I do not blame you for coming. It is unfortunate, but we must not give occasion for remark."

They walked on a pace or two in silence, and then he spoke again very gently.

"Have you ever heard of me ? Do you know who I am ?"

"Yes," Elsie said, quick tears springing to her eyes as she looked reproachfully up at him ; "I do know. I have never been told, but I know. You are my uncle—my mother's brother. I have seen your name in her old story books. That was my cousin you pushed away from me."

"And you do not know why ?"

"No."

There was another long silence, and Elsie saw how the stern face turned from her, twitched, and trembled. They were close to the house now ; a glass door stood open. Mr. Neale led her through it, and across a wide passage into a room. As soon as he had closed the door behind them, he took both her hands in his, and stood opposite to her for a minute or two considering her face.

"You are like your mother," he said at last ; "hardly at all like your father. You have not changed much in growing up. Poor child—poor child—poor little Alice !"

The stern grey face bent towards her, and Elsie felt a kiss on her cheek.

"Good-bye; I am not sorry to have seen you, my niece Alice. You have darkened what ought to have been the brightest day of my life with sad recollections, but I am glad to have seen you. Good-bye!"

The door closed behind him before Elsie could find a word to say. She sank down into the nearest seat and covered her face. It had been very terrible. What did it all mean? A strong sense of injustice kept her at first from feeling all the pain that her uncle's manner was calculated to cause her. She had not deserved to be so treated, she said to herself. She had dwelt on her mother's memory, and longed fervently to know her family, and thought about them, and dreamed of them all her life, and now at last here she was shut up like a prisoner in one room in her uncle's house, and forbidden to see any one. Margaret was right after all in keeping her shut up, if such pain and humiliation as she had felt to-day were likely to result from her coming among other people. She would never try experiments again. The thought of the seclusion and monotony of home began to be welcome to her. Mr. Neale's gesture when he seized her hand, and the look that went with it, had given her a sort of horror of herself. She had done wrong in trying to escape from the shadow under which the others lived. Cecil's kindness and Steenie's love could not lift her out of it. They might make a warm bright glow of happiness outside, but she should be always snatched back away from them into the dark.

It was a long time before Elsie lifted up her head from her hands. When she did, her eyes fell on a portrait that hung on the wall just opposite to where she was sitting, and she gave a start of pleased surprise. She knew it in an instant. It was the original picture from which Margaret's miniature had been taken. The curls fell just in the way she knew so well; the sweet childish eyes laughed at her; the red lips parted just as if they were going to speak. The same feeling of love for the pictured face, and delight in it, came over her that she had had when she saw it first. She could not help holding out her arms to it, and speaking aloud: "Alice Pamela Neale. Mamma, mamma!" and then a burst of tears came and washed some of the despairing, frightened thoughts out of her heart.

It might be very foolish to be consoled because a picture seemed to smile at her, yet the sight did relieve Elsie's pain. She rose and walked across the room, and pressed her lips

against the painted lips with a whispered "Dear mother." And when she got down again, the room no longer looked like a prison to her; she had found an unexpected welcome, and she could not be angry that she had been taken there.

A servant came in soon afterwards, bringing her some refreshments. She could not eat, but she drank some water and bathed her eyes. Then she drew her chair to the window, and sat down to watch for the outpouring of the people from the tent, which would be the signal for her release. The time seemed very long. She tried hard to keep herself from thinking, that there might be no traces of emotion on her face when Miss Berry came for her. By degrees the flower garden at which she was looking began to melt curiously into the green lawn and waving trees beyond. She fancied the chair she was sitting on turned round of its own accord, and began to move towards the wall. No, it was the picture on the wall that had stepped from its frame, and was coming towards her, smiling, radiant, with both hands stretched out; it stooped over her. Elsie felt warm lips pressed to her forehead, and started awake to find Cecil kneeling by the side of her chair, laughing at her bewilderment.

"No, I am not Grandmamma, though I daresay I look as careworn as any grandmother in England. I have gone through such terrible scenes since you left me. To think of your sleeping here so quietly while your friends have been suffering tortures on your account."

"What do you mean?" said Elsie. "Did not Mr. Neale tell you that I was tired and had gone to rest in the house?"

"Yes; and do you suppose we could rest comfortably on such an assurance? Miss Berry and Steenie and I all jumped up together and wanted to go to you; and then Walter Neale—who is such a sheep, he must do whatever anybody else does—got up to follow. His uncle desired us all to sit still in such an awful voice. What had you done to him while he was with you, Flower Aspect? He might have seen Banquo's ghost, or Medusa's head, or anything, to judge by the look he brought back into the tent with him. We none of us enjoyed our luncheon, I can tell you."

"I could not help his coming here with me."

"I should think not, if he took it into his head. But are you sufficiently rested to cross the lawn to the bridge? Miss Berry wants to go home at once, and I shall be glad to slip away quietly, if I can manage it. Grandmamma and my uncle

are to stay the night here. But Stephen and I think we have had enough of Connington. We have ordered the carriage to wait for us on the bridge. Can you walk so far?"

"Oh yes; I am longing to get home."

"Come then, and I will describe the terrible scene that has all but made my hair turn white as we go along."

"I thought you had told it me."

"Oh no; Mr. Neale's moodiness only affected a few people seated near him, but this involves all Oldbury. I can hardly help laughing now I think of it, but I really was frightened at the time. Stephen and Mrs. Lutridge have had such a quarrel, and all the Oldbury people heard it."

"What was it about?"

"I may as well tell you, for if I don't, some one else will. Mrs. Lutridge seems to have been in an evil temper ever since she came here to-day. She was talking in a loud aggrieved tone nearly all luncheon time, and at last we overheard your aunt's name, and found that Mrs. Lutridge was venting her anger by abusing her, and that she actually quoted Mr. Pierrepont as her authority for some of the slanders she was promulgating. Stephen left his place at the upper end of the table and went and stood behind her chair till she had finished her harangue, and then said aloud before every one that he did not believe his father had ever made the statements attributed to him, and that unless Mrs. Lutridge would acknowledge that she had been mistaken, he must bring his father to confront her. You should have seen the dismay on Mrs. Lutridge's face. It was clear that her story would not bear investigation, and yet to get an acknowledgment from her that she was wrong was like dragging the very life out of her. She actually shed tears; but Stephen would not let her off for that. He was quiet, but very firm. I think he behaved very well, and I must say I admired him. When the Miss Tomkinsons, who had been drinking in the slanders delightedly, got up to go away, he begged they would wait till the question was settled; he was sure, he said, that they would be sorry to carry away a false impression. At last Mrs. Lutridge muttered a word or two into her handkerchief about being sorry and mistaken, and Stephen repeated them after her loud enough for every one at the table to hear. How she will hate him all the rest of her life!"

"Oh, I hope not!"

"Yes, she will. Think how she has lorded it over every-

body all her life, and now to have to own herself wrong before all her satellites, and beg pardon at Stephen Pierrepont's bidding. I am afraid she will never rest till she has done something to reinstate herself. If only some one of your name would steal or commit a murder, how pleased she would be! She would look upon it as a providential interposition to vindicate her judgment, and would not be at all surprised at its happening."

"Would you mind telling me what she said against Aunt Margaret? I can't imagine what she could say."

"It was very absurd. She accused your aunt of having at one time tried to inveigle Mr. Pierrepont into marrying her; she said that he broke off all her intercourse with your family abruptly because he heard some dreadful story against them. Mixed up with this there was a strange tale about some letters which your Aunt Margaret is said to have asked for at the post-office under a feigned name. It is all too silly to be believed even in Oldbury, yet I think Stephen was right, even at the risk of a disagreeable scene, to interfere to prevent such a story getting abroad."

"Did Mr. Pierrepont hear anything of the quarrel?"

"No; he was seated at another table about half a mile away, talking to the Bishop. Steenie was quite prepared to bring him and the Bishop too on the scene, if it had been necessary. Luckily Mrs. Lutridge capitulated in time to save Oldbury the disgrace of having its quarrels brought under episcopal censure. Here is Miss Berry coming to meet us. She has been crying her eyes out since Mrs. Lutridge's discomfiture. Don't allude to it again before her. We must do our best to restore her spirits."

It had indeed been anything but a day of pleasure to Miss Berry, and she did not disguise the satisfaction with which she turned her back on the scene of the entertainment.

"I know," she said, as she seated herself in a remote corner of the carriage into which Stephen handed her, "that everybody did everything with the best intentions; but oh, my dears! the whole day since we arrived at Comington, from the moment when I saw how Mrs. Lutridge's eyebrows were going, has been very awful. You may say what you please to me, Steenie, but I always shall think that Caroline's running out just when she did *was* an intimation, and to the last day of my life I shall be sorry that I did not attend to it."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE OLD LIFE AGAIN.

THE fortnight assigned for Elsie's visit to Miss Berry expired the next day; and when she came down in the morning, she found a letter from Margaret on the breakfast-table, informing her that she and Mr. and Mrs. Blake hoped to reach Oldbury early in the afternoon, and that they would like to find Elsie waiting for them at home when they arrived there. She gathered from the letter that her grandmother had been rather less well than usual during the last few days, and that Margaret was uneasy about the effect the journey might have on her.

Elsie glanced round Miss Berry's sunny little room as she put down the letter, and sighed, and then thought of her grandmother, and was very angry with herself for the momentary feeling of blankness that had come over her. She had made many resolutions about taking a brave heart back with her when she went home, and conquering her fears of her grandfather so as to make herself more of a companion to him, and winning her way into Margaret's confidence, and she chided herself for not being more eager to begin putting her plans in execution. Cecil came in as soon as breakfast was over, and talked over her departure as if it meant nothing more than lengthening the distance between them by the walk up the hill; but Elsie knew better, though she could not bring herself to say how certain she was that her grandfather's and Margaret's return would put a stop to their intercourse altogether. Miss Berry consoled herself for her loss by commenting to Cecil on the improvement which the fortnight's visit had effected in her guest's looks; and, indeed, when Elsie came into the little room at the last moment with her bonnet

on, and found that Stephen Pierrepont, as well as Cecil, was waiting to walk with them up the hill, there was a brilliant bloom on her cheek that justified her friend's congratulations.

"Perhaps I ought not to have said anything about it," Miss Berry remarked penitently to Cecil, as they all four left the house together. "I have been thinking too much, perhaps, of how her sweet looks light up the house. 'Beauty is nothing after all, you know, but dust and ashes,' as Miss Tomkinson very properly reminded me yesterday, when I repeated to her something some one had said about Elsie's complexion. It always disgusted her when people admired her for her looks. she said (I don't remember ever to have heard of any admirers she ever had, but I suppose she knows best about that herself), and now, when she sees a beautiful complexion, it only makes her think of the 'foul worm,' as the hymn says, 'that shall fret

The skin that but yesterday fools would adore
For the smoothness it held, or the tint that it wore.'

It is very creditable to her to have such solemn thoughts, is it not, my dear? I am afraid I shall never attain to so much spirituality myself, and sometimes I venture to hope that it may not be *quite* necessary; for would God have made so many pretty young things if He meant us never to see anything but the 'foul worm' in them?"

Miss Berry walked rather briskly up the hill as she delivered herself thus to Cecil, and Elsie and Stephen fell a pace or two behind.

In spite of her resolve to keep up a brave heart, Elsie could not help pausing half-way up the hill to take a look back at the little house on the sunny side of the street she was leaving. "I can't understand how it is," she said to Stephen, "that there seems to be so much less sunshine on the top of the hill than there is down here."

Mrs. Lutridge, with her tract basket on her arm, pushed between them as they stood talking together, and walked majestically on without paying the smallest heed to Stephen's salutation.

"An open declaration of war," he said, laughing, as they turned to resume their walk. "It's a little overdone, for one does not exactly see what is to come of it. I wonder what harm she thinks her displeasure can do us?" He finished his sentence with an inquiring look into Elsie's face as he slightly emphasized the plural pronoun.

Elsie walked on a little quicker after this, to catch up Miss Berry and Cecil, who were waiting for them at the top of the hill.

"Are you going quite up to the house with us?" said Miss Berry to Stephen a little nervously, for the encounter with Mrs. Luttridge had not escaped her notice.

"To be sure we are," answered Cecil. "We are going to conduct the fairy princess back to her brazen tower, and break the spell by entering it in a body. I shall leave Oldbury happier, Flower Aspect, for having been inside your house, and satisfied myself that it is not hung round with bells and enchanted mirrors, like Lady Minnitrost's bower."

The workpeople in whose hands the house had been left, had exercised the discretionary power given them in a bolder spirit than Crawford had ever ventured upon. The dingy brown curtains in the library had been replaced by fresh green ones; the chairs and sofas covered with new chintzes. Elsie moved freely among it all. The walls of the rooms and the furniture no longer breathed out "Margaret, Margaret, Margaret," as she had always fancied that they did before. She even ventured to take her visitors to the study itself. Stephen took down the great books from the shelves and turned them over with irreverent hands, and talked and laughed in the old silent room, till the spell of its gloom seemed broken for ever, and Cecil put her slender brown hand deep down into the old purple scent vases, and drew out a handful of the faded *pôt-pourri* leaves, which Elsie in her childhood believed had come from some very distant sacred place, and had regarded with a kind of awe.

At last Miss Berry discovered that they had spent an hour and a half in the house, and that they really must go away. Elsie walked down the garden with them, and there was another long delay, while Cecil explored Margaret's favourite high-terraced walk, and questioned Miss Berry about the distant points of view to be seen thence; and Steenie talked to Elsie a little incoherently about his disinclination to leave Oldbury this year, though he knew he ought to be in London pursuing his legal studies; and Elsie looked steadily away over the sunny landscape, and watched the shadows of the fleeting clouds on the distant hills, not daring to turn her head and meet the eyes that were watching for a farewell look so closely. They worked their way round to the gate just in time to encounter Mrs. Luttridge a second time, on her return from her district.

"She is bringing the three Miss Tomkinsons home with her to lunch at Laurel House!" exclaimed Miss Berry. What will they all say about our having spent the whole morning here? Dear, dear! they will know exactly how long we have been together."

"What business can it be of theirs?" said Stephen impatiently. "I wonder what event out of Oldbury would be startling enough to turn the Miss Tomkinsons' thoughts from watching their neighbours. If America were submerged, or we had news that all the crowned heads in Europe had been cut off simultaneously, would they talk of that and leave us alone for a few hours, do you suppose?"

Elsie walked slowly back to the house when her friends had left her. Empty as it was, it had never looked less solitary to her than it did now. She made haste to go into all the rooms, that she might learn them by heart under the new impression of them she had received. A little bow of bright green ribbon with golden stars on it, which had fallen from Cecil's dress, lay on the dining-room floor. Elsie ran to it, picked it up, and held it lovingly in her hand, and then let it fall on the carpet again that she might look at it there. So fresh, so dainty, so different from anything that had ever lain there before; so different from anything Margaret would have allowed to be there. In that corner of the sofa Cecil had sat for a moment; Stephen had stood there, where the patch of sunshine fell on the floor—the house was full of them now; a new era had begun for it and Elsie. She ran upstairs to put away Cecil's ribbon in the drawer where her mother's miniature was kept, and then went out into the garden to gather some flowers to arrange in one or two long disused vases in the sitting-rooms. When she had filled them and restored them to their places, she looked round surprised at the new character given to the room by that trifling change.

"The house is alive now instead of dead," she said to herself. "What will Margaret say?"

She heard the sound of carriage wheels approaching the house while she was still admiring her work, and ran out into the entrance hall to meet the travellers. To people who have known few separations, a meeting after ever such a short absence is a formidable thing. They find it difficult to imagine that the friends from whom they have lately parted will come back just what they were when they left them.

Elsie had this feeling strong upon her when she ran into the

hall, but it was rather hope than fear of finding a change that made the few minutes of waiting full of suspense.

The first glance at Margaret's pre-occupied face, as she helped her father from the carriage, the first sound of Mr. Blake's complaining voice, restored the sense of familiarity. It was all the same—it was all exactly the same. The old life or the old death coming into the house.

Margaret left a silent kiss on Elsie's forehead as she passed on through the hall to the library, with her father, and then Elsie heard her name called feebly; and the chill went out of her heart as Mrs. Blake, a good deal paler and feebler than when she went away, tottered into her arms, and broke out into mingled expressions of pleasure at being again at home with Elsie, and of thankfulness that she had accomplished the journey.

Margaret returned from the study to assist Elsie in taking Mrs. Blake to her room. "Yes," she said, in answer to an alarmed look of Elsie's, "she is weaker than when she left home: the journey and the interview with our friends have been too much for her. We must get her to bed quickly, and perhaps she may be better to-morrow."

Mrs. Blake fell into a heavy slumber soon after Margaret and Elsie had helped her into bed. Elsie would have liked to remain by her side all the evening, but after a time Crawford came up and sent her away.

It was beginning to grow dark when she went downstairs. Every trace of the late arrival had been done away with; the boxes and wrappers removed from the hall, the marks of the dusty footsteps even had been swept away. The pleasant-faced charwoman had departed to her own home.

Mr. Blake sat with a book on his knee in his usual evening place in the drawing-room, and Margaret was writing at the table, on the same sized sheets of paper, with the same sort of pens she always used. There was nothing about her to show that she had not sat writing there every evening for the last fortnight. She took Elsie's hand as she passed, and kissed her again; but she asked her no questions, and offered no information about what had occurred during their absence from home. She meant the old life to begin again without any allusion to the break that had taken place in it. Elsie went and sat on a stool in the recess of the window that overlooked the garden, and bent down her head on her knees. Was it all a dream? Had she been asleep for a fortnight, and was she only now

awake? Were Cecil and Stephen dreams, such as she had sometimes before conjured up and lived with for a time, and lost afterwards? When she looked up at her grandfather and Margaret she could half believe that this was so, and the sharp pain the thought brought with it almost made her angry, and awoke a revolt against Margaret's treatment of her, such as she had never felt before. It was hard, it was cruel. Elsie's reason took the side of pained feeling for once, and forced her to say this to herself; she had come back with such affectionate feelings in her heart, it was hard to have them thrust aside, hard to be condemned to the still routine in which the others passed their lives, and yet to be made to feel that she was of so little importance to them, that they would not trust her with any real knowledge of their anxieties and interests. She was no more to her grandfather and Margaret than a piece of furniture in the house they were accustomed to see, she told herself bitterly; and yet she knew quite well that it was just those two who would oppose most strongly any effort that might be made by people who did care for her to draw her away from them.

There was such a deep stillness all through the house that she could hear every tick of the old clock on the library mantel-shelf; it seemed to be a pulse throbbing in pain all day and all night. How often she had listened to it! It was an old fancy of hers, that all the hearts in the house beat in time to it silently—in silent pain, she said to herself now; and that its inarticulate sound was the only expression of fellow-feeling which passed among them, linking them mutely together, beating out their still, sad, unsympathizing lives day after day.

"Elsie, are you going to sit all the evening doing nothing?" Margaret said at last; "it is a very bad habit." And Elsie jumped up hastily, dragged open a drawer in the work-table near, took out a knitted coverlet which Mrs. Blake worked at sometimes, and began taking up stitches that Grandmamma had dropped a fortnight ago.

Margaret's receipt for all manner of suffering was work. She could not have gone on living herself if she had not found employment of one kind or another for all her waking hours.

She put down her pen once or twice this evening, however, to look long and consideringly at Elsie as she bent over the knitting. "Poor child," she thought, "poor child. It has been bad for her—this escape from solitude and return to it again. She is changed since she went away. Her eyes have a new expression in them. What is it? Not that—I hope, not that.

She cannot have met any one to awaken that feeling. I will not frighten myself with the thought of such a misfortune to-night." And a softer look came into Margaret's face when she addressed Elsie again, and Elsie's tender heart relented to her all at once ; and when she went upstairs, she busied herself till very late in various arrangements that were meant to save Margaret trouble, and promote her comfort, though she knew there was small chance of Margaret's perceiving they had been undertaken for her sake.

CHAPTER XXV.

OUT ON THE UPLANDS.

Mrs. BLAKE did not recover from the fatigue of the journey as her friends had hoped she would. She made no effort to leave her bed the day after she returned home; and when Elsie went to her on the following morning to help her to dress, she was shocked to observe a great change in her countenance. The doctor who was sent for pronounced that she had had a second stroke of paralysis in the night. Her case was not altogether a hopeless one, he said. The effects of the attack might pass off to a certain extent, as had been the case after her first seizure, but it was hardly possible she should ever again recover the full use of her faculties.

For a time Mrs. Blake's danger and suffering entirely occupied the thoughts of every one in the house. Margaret's time was much taken up in efforts to comfort her father, and thus the chief part of the attendance in the sick-room fell on Elsie.

Mrs. Blake's speech was impaired by this fresh access of illness; she could only bring out a few words at intervals painfully and slowly, but she understood what went on around her, and her poor drawn lips could relax still with an attempt at a smile when Elsie came near her.

During the first days of her illness Elsie could never leave her side for an instant, and had no room in her heart for any thoughts that did not concern her; but time passed on, and no change came. It began to be acknowledged that no immediate change was likely to come. The duties of the sick-room arranged themselves into a regular routine; and as Elsie busied herself with them, or sat for long hours watching at the invalid's bedside, thoughts and interests of the outside world which had

been peremptorily thrust aside, stole gradually back into her mind.

The Oldbury people were punctilious in sending to inquire after their neighbours when they were sick, however little they had liked them while they were well ; and a good deal of Crawford's time was taken up in answering messages of sympathy that were delivered at the door day after day. Mrs. Lutridge's footman strode up the steps at least once in every twenty-four hours ; and Miss Berry and her neighbours from the Rectory quite haunted the house.

Through the open window of the sick-room Elsie could hear Crawford's dry voice giving always the same answer to every one who called to inquire : " Mrs. Blake was no better, and neither Miss Blake nor Miss Elsie was able to receive visitors."

Sometimes when the door had been opened in answer to a knock which always made Elsie's heart beat quickly, though it came regularly twice a day, there was a little further parley, but it was invariably brought to a close by the same sentence.

Elsie heard Crawford declare in her most discouraging tone of voice that " Miss Elsie was busy in her grandmamma's room, and that she had orders not to disturb her by taking up messages from any one."

She used to steal to the window on tiptoe, and watch Stephen Pierrepont, as he slowly walked down the garden, with a very helpless, imprisoned feeling. He would be tired of coming soon, she thought, or he would leave Oldbury ; each day she excused herself for getting up to look, by saying that it was most probably for the very last time.

On one occasion when she distinguished Cecil's voice as well as Stephen's remonstrating with Crawford at the door, she ran downstairs determined to speak to them for one instant. As she passed the library, Margaret came out (as if she were going to cross the hall to the drawing-room), and laid a detaining hand on Elsie's arm.

" We will both stand back till the front door is closed," she said ; " we shall have no peace if we once begin to see callers."

Elsie shook Margaret's hand off hastily and ran back to Mrs. Blake's room. For a few moments she felt desperate enough to resolve to put on her bonnet, follow her friends down the hill, and see them once more in defiance of Margaret ; but just as she was leaving the room her grandmother called her, and while she was attending to her wants the excitement that had given her courage to contemplate such a measure died away.

She could not forget the disappointment, however, or her sense of Margaret's unkindness; and in the evening, when Margaret sent her out at the usual hour to take the air in the garden, instead of walking up and down the gravel-walk, she leaned her elbows on the low terrace wall near which she and Stephen had stood together, covered her face with her hands, and indulged in a long fit of weeping. She was so disheartened, so puzzled, and the change from brightness to sadness had come so suddenly. She did not wish to be selfish and dwell on her own private disappointment when there was graver sorrow in the house, yet it did seem dreary that no one should know or care in the least what she was feeling.

She was very much ashamed of herself when the crying fit was over, and tried hard to bring her swollen eyelids into order before she returned to her grandmother's room.

"Poor child," Margaret thought when she gave up her seat by the bedside to Elsie on her return, and observed the traces of tears on her face.

Grief that could vent itself in a shower of tears had long seemed to Margaret a very slight thing, yet she took some unwonted care for Elsie's comfort before she left her. She turned her chair towards the window that her hot eyes might be refreshed by the evening breeze, and brought up a book from the library, advising her to make an effort to fix her mind on its contents.

Elsie let the volume fall from her hands when Margaret left the room, and made up her mind that Margaret could never have been very unhappy, or have cared much for any one in her life, or she would not suggest such a remedy for grief; and Margaret, as she closed the door behind her, reiterated her "Poor child!"

It seemed to her that there were so many descents on the road of sorrow from that shower of April tears to the point of dry-eyed endurance where she had long stood, that, looking back and measuring the distance, a very unusual spasm of self-pity came over her.

"Child—poor child!" she repeated the phrase again as she took her twilight walk up and down before the house, and pondered how she might save Elsie some of the rugged steps she had herself taken, by exercising watchfulness over her now.

A few more days passed, and a slight improvement in the state of the invalid somewhat comforted the hearts of the watchers.

Elsie felt almost happy on the day when her grandmother was lifted for the first time from her bed to a sofa, and was able to make her understand that she should like to have her knitting brought to her. She ran joyfully to the drawing-room to fetch the cumbrous piece of work that had been in hand so long, and which she had thought a little while ago would never again have another stitch added to it. As she was crossing the hall on her return, she heard the postman's knock, and a letter flew through the slit in the door on to the pavement at her feet.

She saw her own name in Cecil's handwriting on the envelope, snatched it up and ran quickly upstairs with her treasure. Its arrival seemed just the sort of thing that ought to happen on such a happy day as this; an event that made the gladness she was feeling before overflow.

Mrs. Blake saw the pleasure in Elsie's eyes when she entered the room again, and smiled kindly at her.

"Nothing particular has happened, Grandmamma," Elsie said, answering the question in the eyes that the lips could not frame; "only everything looks very bright to-day, and I am so glad of it."

She spent nearly half an hour arranging and holding the work so that her grandmother could put in a few stitches, before she made any attempt to examine her letter; and even when Mrs. Blake bade her lay the work aside, and closed her eyes to rest after her exertions, she turned the envelope round and round, and felt its thickness, and guessed how many sheets it contained, before she proceeded to break the seal.

A second letter fell out when she unfolded Cecil's sheet. She gave one quick, breathless glance at the large handwriting, and let it lie where it fell, while she read:

"DEAR FLOWER ASPECT,

"This is worse a great deal than we expected. Sleeping Beauty's thorn hedge, or the folds of the serpent that encircled Thora, were not half such formidable obstacles to intercourse as the iron-faced dragon at your door who guards you. Do you really not wish to see me again? I don't know exactly how much longer I may remain in Oldbury. My father has returned to England, but he is too busy to send for me yet. There is a talk of his going out as Consul-General to Shanghai, and if he accepts the appointment he has promised not to leave me behind in England. He wants to take Steenie too, and there is a grand commotion going on about that at the

Rectory. Flower Aspect, you have a great deal in your hands; my Uncle Pierrepont would go down on his knees to you if he knew your power. I wonder whether the thought of influencing a person's whole career in life will make you feel as consequential as it would make me?

"I walk up and down the Rectory garden, wondering and planning. Suppose you and I should have a great deal to do with each other in the future, and should be talking about Oldbury together in some queer place at the other side of the world by this time next summer? I only say suppose. I was tyrannized over, and forced to consent to put in the note folded in mine. Of course I don't know what is in it, but I guess. If your dragon were the least bit less implacable, or if this Chinese question did not loom so large before us all, I would never have taken so much on myself.

"Your loving friend wherever I go, or whatever happens,
"CECIL RUSSEL."

The other letter, to which Elsie now turned, had no regular beginning:—"I did not mean to write to you," it ran; "I had so much rather have spoken the words you will now have to read. They were often on my lips when I was with you, but a promise I had made not to speak to you till your friends returned to Oldbury held them back. Now that I am free to tell you what I feel for you, I am afraid you will think I am choosing a wrong time to speak. Yet I can't bear to think of your being anxious and unhappy, and not claim a right to share your trouble by saying, 'I love you.' I have long loved you; and everything that concerns you is, and always will be, of the utmost moment to me. Now you know what I have been longing to tell you all the summer. I shall not venture to say more now. I will wait patiently to hear what hope you can give me; but don't let fears or scruples about other people's objections weigh with you till you have talked to me. Nothing will discourage me but your telling me that you don't care for me. All other objections I shall hope to overcome. Be true to me and yourself, and if you think you can return my love let me know.

"Yours faithfully,

"STEPHEN PIERREPOINT."

Mrs. Blake did not open her eyes or speak to Elsie while she was reading. She sank gradually into one of the heavy sleeps

in which so much of her time was now passed, and the afternoon sunshine faded out of the room, and the shadows of twilight stole in while Elsie sat still with the letters in her lap. She was not so much thinking as feeling. As she sat and mused, she turned over a leaf in her book of life which could never be turned back again. It was one of those hours that make a chasm in a life, dividing sharply the past from the future. The previous days and hours had been leading up to it, but to herself the change seemed to come in a moment. The timid preference she had hardly dared to look at, rose up at once into conscious, trustful, proud love. She laid her cheek on Stephen's letter when she had read it a second time, and then it was done—she had given herself away, her heart and her faith for ever; and whatever came of it, it would be impossible for her to call them back. No to-morrow could be to her the same as yesterday. Her thoughts did not turn to the picture of the future Cecil had suggested. Nor did she vex herself just then with fears about difficulties and objections that lay in the way at present. She was wholly absorbed in the wonder of the change that had come into her inner life. She had been alone, and she should never be alone again. She had put her hands once for all into another's grasp; and life, and death, and the future beyond, everything wore a new aspect to her.

Mrs. Blake slept on while these thoughts passed through her darling's mind. Once in the twilight Elsie put up her hand and softly touched her cheek. She did so long to be able to open her heart to some one she loved. The movement disturbed the invalid's uneasy slumber. She moaned and muttered some half audible words, which Elsie bent down her ear to catch. It was something about Margaret.

"I shall not be here then. I shall be no hindrance to your going with him wherever he likes by that time, Margaret."

The distressed tones gave a painful jar to Elsie's feelings, and forced the conviction on her that she must not talk to her grandmother about her own happiness now.

Crawford entered at last, and dismissed Elsie from her lodgings, telling her that her grandfather and Margaret were waiting tea for her down-stairs. She ran into her own room before she went down, took her mother's miniature from the shelf where it was kept, and held it close to the window pane that the little daylight that remained might show her the face.

"Mother, do you know that I want you more than I ever did in my life before?" she whispered, as she pressed her lips to the smiling, childish lips. "I wish I had another picture of you. I wish I knew how you looked on the day that was like this day to you."

For the first time in her life she was almost sorry that the pictured eyes laughed up into hers so gaily, and that the white brow had no shadow of deeper thought on it than a happy child's might wear. She shut the case quickly, and ran downstairs. The days were shortening now, and Margaret had the curtains drawn, and the lamp lighted early, and sat writing at the centre table all the evening. Elsie sat beside her with her work. She did not want to talk, but little smiles went in and out of her lips as she plied her needle diligently; and once or twice she put down her work and went to the window, and drew aside the curtain, and looked towards the town. She did not do it stealthily, as she had done on previous evenings. She looked, and when she turned back to the room again there was a sort of radiance on her face. Margaret watched her in surprise. Elsie seemed to have laid aside her usual shrinking timidity. She returned Margaret's anxious gaze with a smile; and when they went upstairs together, she put her arms round her neck and kissed her as she had never kissed her before in her life.

The next morning brought some anxious thoughts with it. She followed Margaret about the house, whenever she was not wanted in her grandmother's room, longing and yet fearing to get an opportunity of speaking alone to her. In the afternoon, when Margaret was shut up in the library with Mr. Blake, Crawford, who had observed Elsie's restlessness, and who was more awake than Margaret to the ill effect that close attendance on the sick room was having on her health, persuaded her to go out for a walk. A message had to be conveyed to a village about a mile from Oldbury, where a woman lived whom Margaret was anxious to engage as temporary servant during Mrs. Blake's illness, and Crawford asked Elsie to undertake to deliver it while she sat with Mrs. Blake.

The prospect of a long solitary walk was extremely welcome to Elsie just then. The house felt oppressive to her, and she longed for the refreshment of the air and a quick motion. Her way did not take her through the town, but straight up by a steep road on to the downs, in a little hollow of which the village she was bound to lay.

The year had dropped down into another stage of autumnal beauty since Elsie had last left the town streets ; there had been a good deal of rain during the previous week, and the turf under her feet was fresh and springy. She could not help bounding on lightly, and giving way to brighter thoughts as the brisk wind and the sunshine freshened her face. She transacted her business in the village quickly ; but by the time she had climbed up to the ridge of the downs again the golden afternoon light was burnishing the green velvety sides of the sloping hills to a sheeny splendour, and filling all the hollows and ridges with hazy delicate lilac shadows. It was the prettiest hour of the day for that particular walk from the ridge of the downs to Oldbury. Elsie paused every now and then to look around her. How she loved the place ! Could any spot in the world ever be as beautiful to her as Oldbury was now ? The town lay below at her feet. Up here in the clear air of the hills it was as still and solitary as if there were no town near. The smooth downs dotted with sheep rose above her ; lower on the hill-sides were the bare stubble-fields, quite deserted now all the harvest work was over. The only human being in sight was a ploughman urging his team up a steep slope a long distance beneath her. In the course of the walk Elsie came to Margaret's favourite view, a sudden opening in the farthest line of hills, where a clear-sighted person could catch a keen glitter of sunshine on the sea, very far away. She looked at it to-day with deeper interest than she had ever felt before. The objects round her were familiar and dear ; that glitter in the horizon spoke of the unknown world and the hazy golden future that lay before her.

She gazed till her eyes were dazzled, and when she turned to continue her walk she did not see, just at first, the figure of a man approaching her on the field path. In another step or two she recognized Stephen Pierrepont ; a turn in the winding road had brought him in sight of her only a minute before, while her back was turned ; her heart gave a great bound, but there was nothing for it but to walk on. He came quickly up to her, and they shook hands timidly and shyly both of them, without looking in each other's faces, and then he turned back and walked by her side in silence for a few paces.

"Well," he said at last, in a voice which he tried to make firm, but the tremor of which Elsie heard, "what is it to be ? What is the answer to my question ?"

Elsie walked on a few steps farther, seeing every blade of

grass and the tiny eyebrights and lady's fingers peeping up between the blades at her feet ; then she stopped suddenly and held out both her hands. " You know," she said, raising her frank eyes full of love and trust to his face.

He read all he wanted to read in them, and drew her towards him and kissed her cheek. Elsie felt it a still more solemn seal to the silent promise she had made when she laid her face on his letter the evening before.

It was a strange dreamy walk they had down the hill after that, hand in hand. Sometimes talking on that inexhaustible theme for lovers, the beginning and history of their mutual love—a very few words, a question or two, and they had made it take in all their lives, and intertwined their past as closely as they believed they should connect their future ; sometimes walking along side by side in a silent wonder of happiness they feared to disturb. It was not till they reached the stile leading out on to the high road close to Oldbury that Elsie dropped down from the cloud-world she had been walking in, and thought of the practical difficulties she had to encounter.

" Aunt Margaret," she said, beginning to walk on a great deal quicker ; " what shall I say to her when I get home ? How shall I tell her ?"

" I thought the first doubtful word would have been ' Mrs. Lutridge,' " Steenie said, playfully. " I hoped it would be, for I am prepared with arguments to talk that difficulty down. Nay, don't hurry on so fast ; we are getting close to your home, and you have not said a word yet on the most important subject of all. When am I to see you again ? You are not going to shut yourself up in your brazen tower and keep me out, as you have done all this last month. How I have watched, and waited, and miserably wandered about everywhere, for the blessed chance of seeing you that has come to-day ! It frightens me to think I might have had to go away without it. I believe you would never have taken any notice of my letter. I have a sort of feeling about you that you might be spirited away beyond ordinary means of communication. I shall never feel quite secure of you but when I have hold of your hand."

" I had rather you let it go now," said Elsie, " for we are close to Mrs. Lutridge's garden gate, and here are the Miss Tomkinsons coming up the hill to take their regular evening walk. They have seen us already."

" So much the better ; before night every one in Oldbury

will know that I am the happiest man in the world; and have won the greatest prize in the world; and the warfare of tongues, of which we must bear the brunt, will have begun. Dearest, you don't mind, it is only the natural consequence of living in Oldbury. Nay, if you look so down-cast, I shall grow frightened and refuse to let you go into the house till you have sworn not to throw me over because Mrs. Lutridge comes and scolds you."

"I am not thinking of her. I am thinking of something Aunt Margaret said one day. I can't forget her face and the tone of her voice when she warned me against making friends, or attaching myself to any one here. She said it would bring nothing but suffering."

"It shall not. What a horrible idea, that my love should bring suffering on you! Will you not take my word instead of hers, that it shall not? Thank you for smiling again. If there are to be difficulties, at all events let us trust each other. You must not let your aunt or any one talk you into unsaying what you have said to-day. You will trust me! Promise."

"There is no use in promising," said Elsie; "I can't help trusting you now; if I love you I must trust you."

"And you do love me—now, and always." They were standing at the entrance-gate to the Blakes' garden by this time, and he took both her hands in a strong clasp.

"Good-bye!" said Elsie. "Please don't come farther than the gate now; I want to go in alone, and have just to-night to think it all over quietly without any one questioning me."

She ran down the garden path till she reached the turn that shut out the road, and then she slackened her pace. There was the house, the blinds of the sitting-rooms drawn down to keep out the sun, just as she had left them, the blown-down branch of honeysuckle she had meant to nail up next morning straggling over the door; but was it an hour or a hundred years since she had seen it last?

As she came close to the house she heard the unusual sound of voices coming through the open drawing-room window. She paused for one moment on the door-step; the tones, but not the words, reached her ears. Aunt Margaret's voice, clear, a little more raised than usual, with something of anger or indignation in it; and then a deep, stern man's voice answering her.

Afraid of overhearing what was not meant for her, she opened the door softly and entered the house.

CHAPTER XXVI.

PERPLEXITY.

THE weeks that had passed so sadly with Elsie, had brought Cecil also some anxieties, the most serious anxieties that had as yet come into her prosperous life. Her visit to Oldbury had been prolonged far beyond the limits first assigned to it; and though her father was again in England, he had not sent for her to rejoin him. "He was so overwhelmed with business," he wrote word to her, "that even her company would be a distraction he could not at present permit himself." The offer of an important official appointment in the East had been made to him; and though he consulted her about his plans, and promised her that if he went abroad for any length of time he would take her with him, he did not hold out any hope of their meeting till after the important decision should have been made.

Cecil longed inexpressibly to see her father. She was seized with a fit of restlessness and anxiety which made her very unlike her usual self; and she fancied that one of her old confidential talks with her father would set her right again.

She spent a great deal of her time, as she had told Elsie, in walking up and down the Rectory garden, making plans for the future; but she found, to her dismay, that under whatever aspect she contemplated the new prospects opening out to her, they would not look as bright as she wished to see them. A scene of dreariness would come over her, whether she pictured her father, herself, and her cousin, with Elsie as his wife, all setting forth together to make a new home in a distant land, among unfamiliar scenery and faces; or whether she thought of having her father all to herself, and leaving the two in

whose concerns she had interested herself all the summer to go on with their story by themselves without any further question of her in it.

"It would be best; yes," she said to herself, "it would certainly be best to have them with us; and yet it would not be the old home party. There was no use disguising that four could never be the same as three; there would be a division, a split into coteries." Cecil saw very clearly how her life would be affected by the change. There would be her father absorbed in his work, even to a greater extent than he had ever been before, able only at rarer intervals to give her the chance word and smile, the precious half-hour's talk, that were the prized events of her days, and between times there would be no gay bantering brother-and-sister intimacy to give zest to all her employments, and bring a home-like feeling into the house.

Stephen might be there ever so much, but the equality between them and the community of interest would have departed. There could never be again the outspoken, eager talk between them that had once, as far as Cecil was concerned, satisfied every intellectual want; the playful, unrestrained criticism of each other's doings; the endless dissections of their own and their neighbours' characters; the sudden chance plunges into grave discourse, in which deeper feelings and aims were mutually revealed. It had been very pleasant; but it could not go on under the new circumstances she was thinking about. Elsie and Steenie, sharing a distinct life of their own, would have stepped on to quite another stage of existence, in which she should have no part.

"Well," Cecil said to herself, "one cannot remain the same, however hard one tries; this is growing up, and it is a much drearier process than one is prepared for. Ah! there is a great green caterpillar on that lilac leaf wriggling itself out of its last skin, before it settles down into a chrysalis." She paused in her walk before the lilac bush to look at it. "It does not seem particularly comfortable. What pangs, what struggles, what an agony it costs this senseless insect to free itself from one outgrown case after another till it reaches a larger life at last! A human soul may well suffer something in throwing off the habits and thoughts of childhood, and setting itself to new relationships in place of the old. It is not a thing to wonder at, or quarrel with oneself for."

A month ago Cecil would have carried off the leaf and the caterpillar to show them to Steenie, and they would have

fallen into a discussion on the appropriateness of her comparison, but now he never seemed to be in a mood for such discussions. She walked on, continuing her solitary reverie; and, in spite of the caterpillar, her thoughts would fly back longingly to the past. Oh those old holiday and college vacation times, when she had felt herself such a queen of hearts, with her father and Steenie and Walter Neale, all vying with each other in devotion to her!—when it had been who could secure the largest amount of her attention, and think first of what would please her. How jealous poor Walter Neale had been over every look and word and smile of hers; and how she and Stephen had laughed at him and teased him. The recollection gave Cecil a little pang now. No relenting towards young Neale, but a faint glimmer of a thought that one might come to long for a kind look and thoughtful word oneself, and that such a want was not exactly a thing to make sport of. Was it in her to love power and service too much, and be base enough to turn true affection into food for selfish vanity? If so, the best thing that could happen to her would be to have to go away into the wilds with her father and Elsie and Steenie, and learn to be satisfied with just the degree of importance that their pre-occupation disposed them to accord her. Well, there was no use staying out any longer. There was a touch of wintry keenness in the air already, crisping up the leaves, and tumbling the red apples on the grass in the orchard. How the garden had changed since she came first to Oldbury in the bright early summer-time!

Stephen had set out on one of the long rambles in which he spent the greater part of his time now, and Mr. Pierrepont had shut himself up in his study and did not wish to be disturbed: but there was Lady Selina, a little querulous at the thought of the approaching separation from her son-in-law, Sir Cecil Russel, whom she had not hitherto seemed to value much; and there was Miss Berry alone and somewhat out of spirits in her house over the way. Cecil ran in to spend the rest of the day in various efforts to enliven them both.

There had been storm-clouds hovering in the atmosphere of the Rectory for some time past. It never was quite a safe, genial, home air that pervaded that house; there were always electric currents in it that a very little movement would bring into dangerous collision. When she first came to Oldbury, Cecil had found it rather an amusing trial of skill to aggravate or smooth down the little jars that were apt to arise when

books, or politics, or any of the questions of the day were discussed between the father and the son. Of late she had observed that these disagreements, let them begin about a matter of ever so little importance, had a tendency to lengthen out and grow serious, and rouse deeper feelings than she had power to calm. She began rather to dread arguments on "Tracts for the Times," or the "Vestiges of the Creation," in which the disputants seemed after a time to lose sight of the original question, and to be aiming shafts at particular views or plans of life which each attributed to the other, and did not like to speak about quite openly. Instead of mischievously introducing vexed questions, Cecil now spent an anxious half-hour each morning hiding away every book or paper that could suggest a dangerous topic, and all the evening she exerted herself to avert collisions. When she succeeded, she perceived with surprise that neither father nor son were particularly obliged to her. They were, in reality, too full of each other, and of the plans for the future which each believed the other was revolving in his mind, to be content to let the conversation glide easily on indifferent topics.

Arguments, quarrels even, which let glimpses appear of the speakers' real state of mind, were far more interesting, and brought them really closer together.

Mr. Pierrepont had been too long accustomed to live among his intellectual inferiors, and to have all his opinions accepted unquestionably, to be very patient of discussion; and yet he had a fidgety anxiety that his son's opinions should on all points coincide with his own, that never allowed him to let a remark he did not agree with pass without comment. It was a question of honour with him, as well as one of conscience, that his son should espouse the side in theological controversies to which he himself was bound. He had inherited his allegiance from his father, whose name had been eminent among the leaders of the Evangelical party in the Church, in the days of its first fervour and influence. It was a name very apt to be quoted on Exeter Hall platforms still, and was held by a section of the religious world to be a guarantee for its possessor's unflinching acceptance of shibboleths that were held to be bulwarks of what was already beginning to be called the old faith. Mr. Pierrepont had felt the obligation himself, and for some years the chief force of his mental energies had been directed to the task of moulding his thoughts, and squaring his convictions to fit certain grooves. It had cost him so much to

come at some of his conclusions that he was proportionately angry when they were assailed. He was in the position of a man always in fear of being robbed of the result of hard toil, and a chance word would sometimes raise a storm in his mind. He had sent his son to Cambridge instead of to Oxford, to avoid the danger of his receiving a bias in theological questions contrary to his own; yet, in spite of all his precautions, whenever anything like grave talk came up between them, some word was sure to be said which showed that his son's sympathies for the most part went with the very men whose influence in the Church he had set himself to combat.

It is undoubtedly a very severe trial which comes to many people about middle life, when they discover that the predominant current of thought, that which they themselves have unwittingly helped to form, is bearing the young of their generation to a standpoint different from their own, and that in sentiment and opinion there is a wide gulf fixed between themselves and those for whose sympathy and concurrence they most ardently crave. It is very difficult for the elders not to feel their descendants and pupils traitors to them, and still worse to the truths which they have cherished, and which they believed they were bringing them up to fight for. Only a very few have strength of sight to discover the old principles alive, and active still under the new forms. Mr. Pierrepont certainly was not one of these far-sighted people. He had never quite faced the thought yet that his son was a grown-up man, and must be expected to think without his guidance, and choose an independent path in life. He had mapped a career out for him himself, and he did not choose to know that the young man's own wishes pointed in an entirely different direction. He wanted him to remain some years longer at Cambridge till he had become disposed to take holy orders, and had adopted his father's side in Church questions. Then he hoped he would come and live at Oldbury, marry suitably (that is to say, in a rank a little higher than his own, as he himself had done), and eventually succeed to the living of Oldbury. It never struck Mr. Pierrepont that there was anything of a worldly spirit manifested in these plans. He took it for granted that inward conditions suited to the outward state he pictured would in due time be brought about.

The spiritual call to the ministerial work would doubtless be felt, the right amount of affection for the well-born and richly-dowered bride would spring up. He presupposed all that, and

allowed his thoughts to hover round the pleasant, easy, outside circumstances mainly. It had grown to be too dear a castle in the air to be easily given up. Yet for the last two months hardly a day had passed during which Stephen had not expressed some intention or made some remark which showed on how insecure a foundation it was built, and how near the hour of its final shattering might be.

Two very decided blows had been aimed at this favourite scheme within the last few days. One came in the shape of a warning respecting Steenie's attentions to Elsie Blake, with which Mrs. Lutridge had not failed to favour him. The other was Sir Cecil's proposal to take Stephen to China with him as his private secretary. He had been in a pitiable state of mind since Sir Cecil's letter came. Of the two threatened evils, it seemed to him that one might be used to avert the other, but he could not make up his mind to which he could reconcile himself most easily. He was walking up and down the library debating this problem with himself while Cecil soliloquized in the garden; and it must be confessed that it was mainly on himself, on how the events he dreaded would affect his own life, that he pondered. It would be a great pang to him to resign finally all prospect of having his son associated in work with him, living close to him during the declining years of his life. He had had that design in his mind ever since the boy was born. He had been unconsciously making over to the ideal companion and prop of his old age a good deal of the fatherly affection which did not flow out quite readily towards the high-spirited lad, whose gaiety oppressed him, or the argumentative youth who questioned his opinions. He might almost as well have never had a son at all, as give up that prospect of what he was to be to him in the future. No, he could not let him go so far away. Yet he saw clearly that if he exacted of his son the sacrifice of this opening in the career he preferred to every other, he must make some concession on his own part. Steenie might give up his wish for foreign service, might be satisfied to remain in England if his love prospered, hardly if he were thwarted in that too. Mr. Pierrepont's steps quickened as thoughts crowded into his mind. Steenie married to Elsie Blake, living here, in this house in Oldbury. He tried to bring the picture before his mind to see how he could bear it, and then, all at once, instead of Elsie's fair timid face by his son's side, there came before him Margaret's, with the pitying proud smile on the lips and in the

eyes he had never been able quite to forget since the day she had turned it on him. The contemptuous, hateful smile, he called it; for, half unconsciously to himself, during all these years the offence had rankled.

He stood still, and gazed out into the garden towards the spot where the quiet, well-remembered little scene had been acted. To be brought into constant contact with Margaret Blake, or to let his son go away from him, which would be the least intolerable? He had not answered this question, or come to any understanding with himself, when he heard a sharp, well-known knock at his study door, and, unannounced, according to old practice, Mrs. Lutridge walked in.

Mr. Pierrepont pushed his hair back from his forehead and sighed. Experience had taught him the uselessness of attempting to get rid of his present visitor till she had said every word she had come prepared to say. It was an infliction that must be borne. He drew forward the visitor's chair, worn into a hollow by Mrs. Lutridge's weight during the many hours she had sat prozing in it, and prepared himself for the inevitable avalanche of words.

It did not begin as immediately as he had expected, and he looked for the first time at his visitor's face. There was actually a faint shade of embarrassment on it, an expression as if she had something to say that she had a little pain on entering upon.

Mr. Pierrepont remembered to have seen something of the kind in her twice before. Once when she had come to consult him, after receiving news of her son's misconduct at Cambridge, and once when she had opened her heart to him about the disagreements between herself and her daughters that were beginning to be the talk of the town. It had not been exactly the Mrs. Lutridge known to all Oldbury, who boxed the ears of charity boys and scolded improvident matrons, that had sat opposite to him on those occasions. It had been a worn woman, with a dejected, wrinkled face, and a voice that had shrill quavers and deep sobs in it as she spoke. Here she was again, fixing anxious eyes on him, and Mr. Pierrepont had only one thought.

He leaned forward in his chair, and spoke kindly. "I trust that no trouble at home brings you here to-day. I trust your son——"

He had made a mistake. The anxious look went out of Mrs. Lutridge's eyes, and a twinkle of malicious triumph came in its

place. At the bottom of her heart she was sorry for what she had to tell Mr. Pierrepont that day, but she had not forgotten the pain his parental vanity in his son's success had often caused her when she was weeping over the disgrace of hers. It was not in her nature not to give him back a blow for all those blows, now she had him in her power.

"Not *my* son to-day," she said, placing a large wrinkled hand solemnly on Mr. Pierrepont's knee. "No, *I* have only cause for thankfulness to-day, that my precious only son, guided by my advice, has escaped the snare into which I grieve to see yours has fallen; but I know what are the pangs of a parent's disappointment, and I come to warn, or rather, I fear, to condole with you."

Mr. Pierrepont pushed his chair an inch or two backwards. He did not much like the heavy fat hand on his knee, and he strongly resented an insinuation that placed his son on a level with Richard Lutridge.

"I really don't understand you," he said stiffly. "I am not aware that there is any subject in connection with my son which calls for condolence."

"Is it possible!" exclaimed Mrs. Lutridge, raising her hands. "My dear sir, this is even worse than I thought. 'The serpent's tooth indeed!' But as you yourself so beautifully said to me, when I was in trouble, 'Must not all the idols we make to ourselves be dashed to the ground?' You are severely tried. Nothing so painful has as yet, I am thankful to say, occurred in my household. It is too bad that your only son should treat you with such disrespect as to engage himself to be married without your knowledge! The whole town is talking of his engagement to Miss Elsie Blake, and you are still in ignorance! I feel for you, my dear friend, I feel for you." Again the heavy hand descended, but this time Mr. Pierrepont fairly shook it off.

"Really, my dear madam, you are exciting yourself unnecessarily. Nothing of the kind you allude to has occurred. It is some foolish report you have heard. I shall inquire of my son himself, and——"

"It is time you did," interrupted Mrs. Lutridge sharply. "The whole town knows more about your son's affairs than you do. He calls at her house every day. I have reasons for knowing that letters have passed between them; and only yesterday the Miss Tomkinsons, coming up the hill to spend a profitable evening with me, met your son and the young lady

walking— But really, I could hardly persuade poor Miss Tomkinson to describe the very familiar way in which they were walking together. It distressed her so that she could not recover her spirits all the evening. However, it was not of your son's engagement with Miss Elsie Blake I came to speak. I presumed you were as well informed on that matter as I am. I have a still more painful subject to bring before you. I came to open your eyes to the character of the people with whom you are about to be connected. Dear friend, prepare yourself for a terrible shock."

"I believe I know as much about the Blakes as any one in the town," said Mr. Pierrepont quietly, "and I have always considered them to be very worthy people."

"But do you—have we any of us in Oldbury ever known who and what they are? I am sorry to say I am now in a position to inform you."

"Well, who and what are they?" asked Mr. Pierrepont, with a gleam of anxiety in his eyes.

"Jesuits in disguise!" exclaimed Mrs. Lutridge solemnly. "Concealed Jesuits! and for fourteen years they have rented a pew in your church. No wonder our young people go astray!"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Mr. Pierrepont, startled out of his self-command by the absurdity of the charge.

"Jesuits in disguise!" reiterated Mrs. Lutridge; "or escaped convicts—most assuredly they are one or other of the two. I do not speak without warrant; I bring proofs that I am right."

"In which accusation? Your proofs can hardly apply to both, can they?" asked Mr. Pierrepont, with the touch of sarcasm in his voice which he sometimes permitted himself when a very flagrant instance of Oldbury absurdity had to be dealt with.

"Yes, they can," said Mrs. Lutridge defiantly; "for who but Jesuits in disguise, or convicts, or conspirators of some sort, ever are guilty of living fourteen years in a place under a feigned name, and of having letters with two directions sent to them? Look at these!"

As she finished speaking Mrs. Lutridge mysteriously drew from her pocket two empty envelopes, which she placed one below the other on the table. The larger was directed, "Mr. Blake, Hill Cottages, Oldbury;" the other, which seemed to have fitted inside it, bore the inscription, "C. Le Fevre, Esq. To be forwarded."

Mr. Pierrepont just glanced at them, and then pushed them aside.

"By what means did these papers come into your possession, may I ask?" he said gravely.

"By means which I considered myself perfectly justified in employing," she answered, all the more stoutly because she did feel a little uncomfortable under the questioning look Mr. Pierrepont turned on her. "It was for your sake I exerted myself to obtain them, my dear friend—solely for your sake. Ever since that day at Connington, when my eyes were opened to what was going on, I have been on the alert; and I grieve to say that an accumulation of proofs that my suspicions of the Blakes are but too well founded crowd upon me. These letters are not all, or even the chief part, of what I have to lay before you. Miss Tomkinson's brother, who is, as you know, surgeon to the convict prison at Dartmoor, has been staying in the town lately. He used long ago to be Dr. Hale's visiting assistant; and one day last week, when our good doctor was too ill to make his usual rounds, he asked Mr. Tomkinson to attend one or two urgent cases. He called at the Blakes, and the instant his eyes fell on Miss Blake he recognized her as a person who was once taken ill in the prison when she came to visit one of the convicts. He was called in to attend on her. She had fainted, and hurt herself in falling. Do you not remember an illness of Miss Blake's some years ago, which led to a great deal of conjecture and talk at the time?"

Mr. Pierrepont did remember, and all at once old puzzles, words and looks of Margaret's that had perplexed him years before, came back upon him with painful vividness. He made an effort to put the growing conviction away.

"All you have told me may admit of very simple explanation," he said; "and you should be careful not to spread injurious reports that may cause great pain to innocent people."

"It was entirely for your sake I concerned myself in the matter," Mrs. Lutridge exclaimed. "I believe I am the last person in the town to whom a want of Christian charity can be fairly attributed, but I have always held that Christian charity should be tempered by vigilance. Dear friend, you will find I am right, and that this unhappy engagement will have to be put an end to."

"But there is no engagement," objected Mr. Pierrepont.

"Your son is at the Blakes' house this moment; I saw him

turning in at the gate as I came down the hill," urged Mrs. Lutridge.

Mr. Pierrepont groaned.

"I am, however, still convinced," he said, after a pause, "that matters have not proceeded so far as you suppose. Pray put a stop to the talk in the town, for Miss Blake's sake quite as much as for my son's. Assure every one that there is no question of an engagement between them."

He spoke a good deal more confidently than he felt, as Mrs. Lutridge judged by the flush on his cheek, and the uneasy tone of his voice, but she did not wish to irritate him by further persistence.

"Well," she said, rising to take leave, "We will hope for the best, and whatever happens, remember you have me to rely on. I am here, ready to take any unpleasant office on myself that might be inconsistent with your dignity. I will see the girl's friends, should they persist in encouraging her in her presumption after your wishes are made known. I will make inquiries. Whatever difficulties you may have you may be sure that I shall not fail you."

At last she was gone, and Mr. Pierrepont had the room to himself to pace restlessly up and down. His eyes fell on the envelopes as he passed the table, and he crushed them up in his hand and tossed them away to the farthest end of the room. He was very much disturbed; he could not get over the painful impression Mrs. Lutridge's story had made on him, and he dreaded the scene he expected to have to go through when his son returned.

The afternoon wore away to evening before Steenie came in, and each hour of waiting and thinking made the interview he had in prospect seem more formidable.

He was so absorbed that he did not after all hear the sounds he was watching for when they came. Cecil, who was watching too, heard the front door open, and Steenie's step in the hall, and ran downstairs to give him a playful warning of Mrs. Lutridge's long interview with his father. The words were on her lips, and she was close to him beginning to speak them, before she looked up into his face. "O Steenie, imagine," she began, and then she paused, and the colour died out of her cheeks as she met his eyes. She thought she should hardly have known him for the same person who had gone out a few hours before in such brilliant spirits, there was such a terrible look of misery in his face.

"Let me pass," he said, in a voice quite unlike his own; and when she would have detained him to ask one more question he put her aside, and strode up the stairs, and she heard him lock himself into his room.

At dinner-time he did not appear, though Mr. Pierrepoint sent up repeated messages to beg him to come. It was altogether a wretched evening at the Rectory. At dinner hardly a word was spoken, and afterwards Cecil wandered miserably about the house longing to be of use, and to understand what was the matter, and yet not daring to question her uncle, who shut himself up in his study directly the meal was over. Lady Selina took herself off to bed early, in displeasure at finding no one at leisure to attend to her. Quite late Stephen came out of his room, and went into the study, in compliance with a summons from his father. Cecil could not keep still. She could not help hovering about the hall and staircase to catch an occasional sound of their voices. They were talking continually in low tones, not quarrelling, she was sure of that, though now and then a word in a higher voice of almost agonized entreaty or pain would be heard above the others.

It was quite dark when Stephen left the study at last. He tried to pass Cecil again in the hall, but this time she would not be repulsed.

"Let me come with you into the garden," she said entreatingly; "just for one turn. O Steenie! I cannot bear to go to bed without hearing something. Let me come."

He drew her hand through his arm gravely, and they went out; but still he was silent. They paced the length of the elm walk without a word.

"Steenie! Steenie!" she exclaimed at last, as a gleam of moonlight showed her his face again; "I can't bear to see you look like that. Tell me something; have you seen her to-day? I don't think you ought to look as you do for anything but her being dead."

"She is not dead then," he said, in the same harsh voice that had frightened her before.

"But what is wrong? Are you not engaged to her? I thought you were last night."

"So did I last night."

"And now. O Steenie! You are not going to give her up because of anything Mrs. Lutridge said to my uncle this afternoon!"

"I did not know she had said anything."

There was evidently no use in cross-questioning him farther. They took several more turns in silence, and Cecil's heart sank each time she had an opportunity of studying his face. She had not known before it could wear such a look. All the youth and brightness seemed to have gone out of it. It was all at once a grave, sad, stern man's face.

As they were re-entering the house he looked towards her, and caught one of the pitying glances she turned on him.

"It is very hard on you," he said gently; "very hard to leave you in suspense, after all your goodness and your love to her. Try to see her while I am away. She will know how much she can tell you, or, at all events, it will comfort her to see you."

"You are going away?"

"Yes; you will be glad to hear this. I am going to see your father. I don't know whether it was right or wrong, but I have promised to consult him; to tell him everything. It was the only promise I could make that would at all satisfy my father, or give him any comfort."

"You have not quarrelled with him? He is not angry?"

"Angry! no; why should he be? What is there to be angry about? It is beyond anger."

"At all events, I am thankful papa is to know. I can't fancy anything so wrong that he cannot make it right when it is brought to him," she said cheerily. She did not get the look of acquiescence from Steenie she hoped for. He held the door open for her to pass in, and then turned back into the dark garden.

Cecil listened for a long time up in her own room, but after all she was obliged to go to bed, and she fell asleep before she heard him enter the house.

"He has been pacing up and down the gravel walk all night," she reflected with dismay, when the shutting of the front door awakened her out of an uneasy slumber in the early dawn of the next morning.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE BURSTING OF THE STORM.

ELSIE went upstairs to her grandmother's room on her return from her walk, without venturing to look into the drawing-room, where Margaret was shut up with her visitor.

The strangeness of Margaret's having a visitor did not occupy her thoughts after the first surprise was over, as it would have done a few hours before ; she was too full of her own happiness. She thought more of the disappointment of finding Mrs. Blake asleep when she entered her room. She had not made up her mind what she should say to her, whether she should tell her news to her or to Margaret first. It hardly seemed right to bring so much excitement to the sick-bed, yet she would have liked her grandmother to be awake, and see the joy in her eyes, and say some one of the tender, sympathizing words that always came from her lips when her darling seemed more than usually happy.

Elsie was too restless to sit still, and her grandmother's slumbers were too profound to be disturbed by her light movements about the room. As she wandered up and down between the window and the bed, she discovered that it was not all joy, not the mere tumult of joy, that agitated her so ; there was a large mingling of fear and anxiety in her feelings, and the more she thought the more prominent the disturbing element grew. She could not make any picture of to-morrow that satisfied her, or imagine a look on Margaret's face, when she told her story to her, that would not be a blight on her hopes. It seemed impossible that Stephen Pierrepont should come to that house day after day, and that they two should have happy hours there, like other lovers, and a crowning day of their own at last, which should send them away to begin a new life together.

It was possible to imagine such things on the open hill-side, with Stephen walking beside her, but it was not possible indoors, in the old rooms, among the old dark heavy furniture that had impressed her with gloom and mystery ever since she could remember, and given to every room in the house a monotonous, unchangeable character of its own. How could such new things as lover's hopes and confidences and joys come in there? Yet as these forebodings rose in Elsie's mind, she did not by any means prepare herself to relinquish her hold on the happiness she believed had come to her that day. It had been given to her—it was hers—and she felt a desperate defiant courage prompting her to cling to it, and not let any one snatch it away; such courage as people of strong feelings and weak wills clasp to their souls sometimes, fruitlessly enough for the most part, as it is always sure to fail them when a calmer sort of resolution opposes it.

All her life she had so longed to be happy, to escape from the gloom and isolation of that terrible house. And now deliverance had come; this bright bird of joy had flown straight into her bosom; she would open her arms to it and clasp it close, and defy cruel looks to kill it.

Margaret went to her room when her visitor left, and stayed there some time, and then she came to summon Elsie to tea.

Elsie looked up anxiously into her aunt's face to see if the unusual incident of her afternoon had left any trace of emotion on it. Margaret's was a countenance not easy to read; agitation of any kind, pleasurable or painful, had equally the effect of wakening it up and embellishing it. Elsie only discovered that her aunt looked younger and handsomer than usual to-night; there was a tinge of rose colour in each cheek, and her usually cold brown eyes were moist and glistening. As they descended the stairs together Elsie found courage to put a question she was longing to ask.

"I heard some one talking to you in the drawing-room, Aunt Margaret, when I came in this afternoon; some one whose voice I did not know. Who could it be?"

"It was an old friend of ours who has lately come to live near here—Gilbert Neale. Mr. Neale of Connington," said Margaret quietly.

"I have seen him, Aunt Margaret; did he tell you that I went with Miss Berry to Connington on the fête day?"

"Yes, he told me."

"Were you glad to see him?—will he ever come here again?" Elsie asked rather eagerly.

They had reached the drawing-room door by this time. Margaret opened it and entered without answering. Mr. Blake was there, and Elsie did not venture to persist in her questions before him.

The tea-hour passed as silently as it had always done since Mrs. Blake had been upstairs. Mr. Blake went away to take his turn of watching in the sick-room, and Elsie, left alone with Margaret, felt a nervous tremor come over her at the thought that now was the fittest time for the communication she had to make.

It was a relief when Margaret brought her writing-desk to the table and began to write. Elsie sat beside her unable to do anything, and feeling almost obliged to watch mechanically the motions of her fingers. For a while Margaret was occupied in transcribing a passage from a book, then she drew out a sheet of note paper and dated a letter. Elsie meant to turn her eyes away, and yet something impelled her to go on looking. The first letter of the name fascinated her attention; she could not help following the syllables as Margaret's fingers formed them. "My dear Mr. Stephen Pierrepont," Margaret wrote, and then she paused, with the pen in her hand, and raising her head saw Elsie's dismayed gaze fixed on the paper.

"Elsie, my poor child," she said, turning towards her, with a gentler look on her face than had been there for years.

Trembling and shaking, Elsie sank on her knees by Margaret's chair.

"O Aunt Margaret! what are you going to do, what are you writing to him?" she said, in a voice that could not raise itself above a whisper. "O Margaret!"

Margaret pushed her desk away, threw her arms around Elsie's shaking figure, and bent a strangely softened face towards her.

"We will talk together before I write to him," she said soothingly.

"No, no; why should we?" cried Elsie. "You and I! What can you have to say to him? Why should you interfere between him and me?"

"I hoped that what I had to write to Mr. Pierrepont would not affect you, Elsie. I heard something to-day from your Uncle Gilbert Neale that makes it necessary that I should give Stephen Pierrepont a word of warning; but I trusted you were

not implicated too. Let me know the whole truth now ; it is best I should. What is he to you ? He was a stranger a very short time ago, as it seems to me."

It would have been an embarrassing question even if Elsie had had a mother's shoulder to hide her face on while she answered ; as it was, she forced herself to look up, and there was pitiful entreaty in her eyes as she said—

"He loves me, Aunt Margaret."

"And you ?"

"Yes, I love him. Margaret, Margaret ! don't look at me in that shocked way. I cannot bear it. What have I done ? It is cruel to look so at me !"

Margaret turned away her sorrowful eyes from Elsie's face, and pressed her hand kindly on her head.

"I am not blaming you, poor child, only myself ; myself, who must have been guilty of some neglect, some unfaithfulness to my trust, for this misfortune to have happened," she said in a voice that made Elsie shiver.

"How long has it been ?" Margaret asked after a pause ; "how long since he spoke to you ?"

"I had a letter—one letter yesterday—and to-day I met him," faltered Elsie.

"One letter, one interview only," said Margaret in a tone of relief ; "I am glad it is no worse than that. He will get my note before he can have spoken of his hopes to any one ; that will spare him some mortification, and prevent gossip and scandal. And since this idea has been in your minds so short a time, the disappointment of giving it up cannot be very great."

"It would kill me !" cried Elsie passionately.

Margaret smiled—a quiet, sad smile that roused Elsie to more vehement protestation than she had hitherto had courage for.

"Aunt Margaret, he shall not be disappointed ! You may write and say what you like to him ; it will make no difference. We have promised, and he will know that whatever you may say I shall not give him up. One promise is as good as a thousand, Aunt Margaret. You can never have loved in your life, or you would not say we can give each other up without pain because we have only promised just to-day. You never can have loved, Aunt Margaret !"

The faint colour Elsie had noticed in Margaret's cheek deepened to a rich glow, and her eyes grew large and clouded

over, as if she were looking at something a long way off. "Elsie," she said, "I have seen to-day the man I loved for as many years as you have loved weeks, and who gave me up for a reason that affects you more nearly than it affected me. It was to save you from the same experience, the same bitter humiliation and pain, that I wished to write to Stephen Pierrepont to-night. If you are wise and self-respecting, you will let me send my letter, and put an end to this hasty engagement on our side, without entering into explanations that can only cause terrible suffering to every one concerned in them."

"He would not give me up, Aunt Margaret," Elsie said confidently after a moment's thought. "Don't look so doubtfully at me; I don't mean that I am worth more than you, only that he is truer. You say I have only known him weeks instead of years, but I do know that about him. He loves me, and he would not give me up just for your writing to tell him that all was over, or for anything else you could say."

"Poor child!" Margaret said again.

"You need not pity me, Aunt Margaret," Elsie answered proudly; "you ought to envy me, for I can trust him. I will get up and leave you to write your note. I am not afraid. He will come here. I shall see him to-morrow, and I know he will deal fairly by me, and let me hear the truth and judge of it myself, whatever you can urge against me."

"I am not against you, Elsie," Margaret said sadly. "Some day, perhaps, you will know more and do me better justice. It is not my fault that there is so little confidence between us. There are circumstances affecting your life which I should have thought it right to acquaint you with long since. They are withheld from you at the request of one to whom you owe obedience. It is a great trial, but you will not lessen it by struggling against it. You shall see my note to Stephen Pierrepont if you like. Since you will not consent to give up the engagement, I shall merely send a line to ask him to come here to-morrow afternoon. I must see him alone. When he has heard all that I have to say, he may speak to you if he pleases; but for your sake, I hope he will be persuaded to go away without exposing you to such useless agitation."

"I shall see him," Elsie said; "I have made up my mind about that. I will not have all my chance of happiness talked away without my being able to help myself, or understand what has happened."

"I can only warn you," Margaret said solemnly, "and

assure you, from my better knowledge, that you cannot help yourself, and may only give yourself a deeper wound than you have any thought of now. Will you look while I write my note to Mr. Pierrepont?"

Elsie stood up, and Margaret resumed her pen; it was but a line or two, requesting him to call and see her at a certain hour in the afternoon of the next day, that she added to her commencement, and then she folded and sealed the note.

Elsie's eyes followed it wistfully as Margaret carried it out of the room. She would have liked to have had it in her hand for one moment, to have laid her cheek on the name written outside. She was actually more occupied with the thought that Stephen Pierrepont would receive the note, that Margaret and not she herself had had the privilege of first sending written words to him, than with anxiety about the result of the appointed interview. He would come to the house to-morrow, —he would certainly be there. He would talk to Margaret and overcome her objections. What was there he could not do? Elsie found she could not be very hopeless or let her thoughts go much beyond that.

Mrs. Blake awoke from her sleep that evening in much pain and discomfort; and Elsie and Margaret had to watch by her bedside a great part of the night. They sat side by side in the dim light of the night-lamp, holding whispered consultations at intervals on the state of the invalid, busied together in many little offices for her comfort, and never approaching by a single word or look the subject that had agitated them both so much during the day.

Each hour that passed Elsie said to herself, "It is nearer to-morrow." She tried to think it was only the interval of suspense she had to dread; when that was over, all would be well. Meanwhile Margaret sat nerving herself for an effort which would make all the old long covered-up wounds in her heart bleed afresh. It must be done. Words she had hoped never to speak again must be spoken when to-morrow came.

The hours of the next day, till four o'clock, were even more tedious to Elsie than the night-watches had been. She had taken a resolution, but it was one of which her conscience did not altogether approve, and the doubt made her restless.

In Margaret's face there was always the same look of suffering. Elsie began to rebel against it in her heart. "It was cruel of Margaret to look so," she told herself; "for was it not her life, her love, that was at stake, not Margaret's? Margaret

had no right to take disaster for granted, and chill her to the soul with such hopeless looks. She could not trust Margaret; she would hear and judge for herself."

She and her aunt were both in Mrs. Blake's room when it struck four. Elsie went to the window to look out. She was very nervous; but her absorbing fear was lest something should prevent Steenie from calling, and she should have to wait another day. When at last she saw him coming up the walk, she gave a start of joy. The window was open, she leaned out; he chanced to look up in passing, their eyes met, and he smiled. Elsie drew back her head into the room, radiant, flushed, triumphant, defiant of Margaret and of fear, smiling at herself for having felt so miserable.

Margaret had been watching her, and understood the look. It told her that her torture hour had come. She rose deliberately, folded the work she was doing, and laid it away.

"You will not leave Grandmamma till I return," she said, looking back anxiously at Elsie as she left the room.

Elsie made no answer; she opened the door Margaret closed behind her, heard Stephen's steps and her aunt's crossing the hall to the library, and the library door closing behind them, and then she waited a minute or two irresolute. Her grandmother lay back tranquilly in her chair free from pain, but not noticing much anything that passed around her. Elsie stooped down quickly and kissed her cheek.

"If you knew, you would be on my side, darling," she said to herself, taking courage and a sort of sanction for what she was going to do from the thought. Then she went downstairs, found Crawford in the kitchen, and sent her to sit with her mistress for half an hour.

There were two entrances to the library; one towards a passage opening into the garden, that was rarely used but in very hot weather, when it was desirable to let as much air as possible into the low-roomed old house. Elsie went in and out that way oftener than any one else; for the corner of the room on which the door opened was very dark, and cumbered with a great folding screen, used in winter to keep the draught from Mr. Blake's arm-chair, and less nimble feet than hers were apt to stumble there.

She opened the passage door softly now, pushed aside a fold of the screen, and stood inside the room a little in the shade, but visible to those within, if they chanced to turn their heads towards her.

Margaret was seated at the farther end of the room by the window, and Stephen near her, with the full light falling on his face. Elsie could almost have read the words on their lips, if her quick hearing had not enabled her to catch them. Stephen had just finished speaking when she entered. It rejoiced her heart to see how tranquil and confident he looked; there was even the beginning of a smile on his lips, as if he were half amused at something Margaret had said.

Margaret looked up to answer him. Her brow was knit with pain, and her hands, usually so quiet, were clasping and unclasping themselves nervously as they lay in her lap, but her voice never faltered; distinct and cold her clear tones sounded through the room.

"I am sorry," she said, "that you will not take my advice, and withdraw your request for my niece's hand on my solemn assurance that there are circumstances in our lives which, if you knew them, would alter your views, and which I cannot explain without pain to myself and risk to her peace of mind."

"You cannot judge of what circumstances would or would not deter me," said Stephen quickly. "I told you just now that I cannot imagine anything you can say making me think or feel differently towards her from what I do now. So long as she remains what she is, and I have her promise, I will never voluntarily give her up. I am prepared for difficulties and objections, prepared to wait, prepared for anything but to resign the promise she made me yesterday at any one's request but her own."

How glad Elsie was she came in! How noble she thought Steenie looked as, in the energy of speaking the last words, he rose from his seat and stood up tall and resolute, looking down on Margaret!

There was silence for a few moments.

"You are forcing a painful task upon me," Margaret said at last. "Let me go through it with as little interruption as possible. You must listen to some particulars of our family history which we would gladly not have been obliged to communicate to any one here. I must trust to your honour to make them as little known as possible. We came here for the sake of the quiet and retirement of the place, and because we were unknown to every one. Blake was my mother's maiden name; my father's name is Le Fevre. My eldest brother, Herbert Le Fevre, is Elsie's father."

Elsie saw Steenie start, and change colour ; all at once his face grew white and wild-looking, as if he had received a terrible blow. She could hardly help calling out aloud, but she pressed her lips tightly together, for Margaret was going on.

" You know the story that attaches to that name ? I have said enough then. Mr. Neale told me you might have heard it."

" No, no," cried Steenie eagerly ; " I have heard nothing that can concern you. There was a Le Fevre—Mrs. Neale's guardian—of whose crimes I have heard, but it is so long ago. That man must be dead long ago."

" He is not dead," said Margaret. " I will tell you the story once for all, with such exculpation as there is for him. He was not always a bad-hearted man, and he had had responsibilities laid upon him for which he was not fitted. My father was asked by a friend of his, on his death-bed, to be guardian to his daughter. He had a great distaste for business himself, and persuaded his friend to join his son's name in the trust with his. Year by year my father fell more and more into the habit of confiding everything to my brother Herbert, in whose integrity and talents for business he had the greatest confidence. He was not altogether what we thought him, though the evil in his character was of slow growth. He had a beautiful gay wife, excessively fond of pleasure and show ; they lived beyond their means, and to escape from difficulties that came upon them, he was tempted to speculate with his ward's money, and lost it. He succeeded in concealing the loss for a time, and went on, hoping to redeem it by fresh adventures ; but one wrong led to another. Miss Connington, while she was still almost a child, made a runaway marriage with Walter Neale, my brother's brother-in-law. My father was angry, and refused to see either of them ; and so we only heard rumours of the discontent and many disputes that arose between the supposed young heiress's husband and her guardian whenever questions of money had to be discussed between them.

" One of these disputes led to the quarrel, the miserable quarrel that ended so fatally for us all. It was not a pre-meditated act. My brother had gone down to Thoresby, where the Neales lived, to settle some business with his ward. The day after his arrival he and Walter Neale went out apparently on quite friendly terms together. As they were returning home after a day's shooting, some of the old subjects of disagreement must have come up between them. Their voices

were heard from a distance loud in dispute ; but no one thought of interfering. I have always believed that Walter Neale struck a blow first ; that it was not the provocation of words only which so maddened my brother as to induce him to fire the shot that killed his companion.

“Walter Neale was found dead in Thoresby woods that evening, and my brother escaped to France. He was soon traced, and brought back. Gilbert Neale, the brother of the unhappy man who had been killed, spared no pains to bring the offender to justice. It was proved on the trial that there had been great provocation, and that my brother’s crime was not premeditated murder ; but the misappropriation of the money told strongly against him, and he was sentenced to twenty-one years of penal servitude. He is bearing it yet,—he, and we, who, being linked with him, must take our share of the suffering and shame that he has earned. Now you know the whole miserable story. It made a noise in the world once ; it would rise up again and follow any one of us who should attempt to take an honourable place in society. Elsie has lived with us since she was a very little child. Her mother died in the first of the evil days, and she has been brought up in ignorance of her father’s history. It has been his wish that it should be so. The one gleam of light in his miserable existence has been the hope of one day meeting his innocent child, and seeing no shame or sorrow for him on her face. I have always feared that such a blessing could not possibly come to him, and yet—I—we have all struggled for it, as the one chance of redemption left for him. Do not come between us, and that single prospect of a measure of good in the future. I do not ask you to conceal what I have told you from your father and friends, if you think it right to tell them ; but keep it from her. Have the courage to go away from Oldbury without seeing her again. You cannot save her from her lot. It is not to be expected of you that you should be willing to share it ; but I do require you to leave her at once, without harrowing her feelings with further interviews, or raising false hopes by promises made in an excitement of feeling now, which you would be certain to repent of hereafter. I am not good at asking favours of any one ; but I do implore this of you.”

Margaret rose as she finished speaking, came close to Stephen, and laid her hand on his arm. Her grave voice had hardly faltered once during her narrative ; but her lips had grown whiter and whiter as they resolutely formed the words, and

now it was a haggard death-like face, with energy and life in the imploring eyes only, that confronted Stephen.

He had turned away while she spoke, and was leaning against the window-frame, his face partly hidden on his arm. He did not immediately look up to answer Margaret; but Elsie could see by the agitation of his whole frame that a severe struggle was going on in his mind. She had gradually come forward almost into the middle of the room. The first sentences of Margaret's story struck her to the heart like the repeated strokes of a knife; she had instinctively put up her hands to defend herself from them, and then her pulses seemed to stop beating. The succeeding words that fell from Margaret's lips buzzed in her ears, darkened her eyes like actual palpable things, but they conveyed no impression to her mind. Her eyes were fixed steadfastly on Steenie's face, watching the changes there; only there she felt capable of reading her destiny, of understanding the meaning of what had come upon her. When he turned away from Margaret to the window, and shaded his face, a new agony struck through her. She made a step or two forward into the room, which seemed to grow dark round her, and strained her eyes to see still. At last he moved his hand from his forehead, and prepared to speak. It would be a sentence of life or death that came from his lips, Elsie felt. The first words, lowly spoken, failed to reach her ears; she was losing the power of listening and looking; the darkness came close to her; she threw out her arms to save herself with a cry of fear, and fell forward in a swoon on the floor.

She fancied afterwards that she had a confused recollection of being raised up in strong arms and carried to the window, and of hearing voices murmuring round her at intervals for a long time; but a crushingly heavy weight lay on her limbs and pressed down her eyelids, and forbade her to stir or look up. She seemed to herself to be lying dead, listening to echoes of sounds, and feeling transmitted touches from a distant invisible world, into which she had no power to bring herself back.

A long time afterwards, when a current of cold air blowing on her face brought a sense of revival, she opened her eyes wearily, and saw Margaret's anxious face bending over her. She was lying on the floor by the study window open to the ground, and a lamp on a table near cast a faint light over the room. She dragged herself up into a half-sitting position and looked round.

"He has gone," she said ; " he has left me ; there is no one here but you."

"Yes, we are alone together, dearest. Are you better?" Margaret answered soothingly ; but Elsie let herself slide down on to the floor again and shut her eyes.

"Elsie," Margaret said, bending over her, "I sent him away. He did not want to go ; but I made him leave us when I saw you were coming to yourself. It was my duty. Dearest, we could not let him stay, you and I, and permit him to speak words, and bind himself by promises, in the excitement of such an hour as this, which he might regret all his life after. We are very unhappy, all of us, but you and I, dear, will never drag down any one we love to share our pain. We can make that resolution at least, and there is peace and self-respect in it."

Margaret's words had a bracing strength in them, like the chill evening air, but Elsie was not in a state to bear them just then. They only made her shiver and moan, and turn her head more resolutely away. She would not let Margaret raise her from the ground ; it seemed the most friendly place to her just then. If only it would open, and take her down a little lower still, and cover her up from the sight of everything that her eyes had hitherto rested on !

Some one came and called Margaret away ; but Elsie lay still where she was, till the moon rose and looked cold on her face, and passed away, and the stars came and blinked at her. She was not thinking. The conversation she had overheard had hardly brought any distinct facts to her mind, or at all events she could not remember them now. She had only a vague horror wandering up and down in her mind, which rose up and thrust the thought of Steenie from her when she tried to recall his face, and blotted out for ever the dreams of father and mother that had made part of her life till now.

The most distinct impression she had was a dread of having to get up at last, and mount the stairs she had run down an hour or two ago, and stand in the window where she had been when Steenie smiled up at her, and be forced to see the places and speak to the people she had last looked upon and spoken to, when there was hope in her heart.

CHAPTER XXVIII

OLDBURY AGHAST.

MR. PIERREPOINT was too anxious and unhappy to conceal from Cecil what had passed between him and Stephen during their conversation on the evening after Mrs. Lutridge's visit. Cecil's anxiety made her a little inquisitive, and Mr. Pierrepoint was not the sort of person to deny himself the comfort of her sympathy and the relief of discussing probabilities with her whenever they were alone together.

He did not at first intend to confide so far in her, but one revelation led to another; and on the morning of the second day after Stephen's departure, while they were pacing up and down the elm-tree walk together, watching for the postman to come up the street, the whole sad history which Margaret had revealed to Stephen was told.

Cecil heard it almost in silence. Perhaps the sharpest pang she felt was the prick of remorse that came when she remembered how she had paced that garden walk, a day or two ago, picturing the happiness of these two, between whom such a thunderbolt had fallen, and allowed thoughts of self to spoil her pleasure in it. How could she be so selfish? Oh, if only the prospect she had then thought a little gloomy would come back now and look probable, or even possible, how thankful she would be!

Mr. Pierrepoint had finished his narration of the facts of the story by the time Cecil's thoughts had reached this point, and he proceeded to expatiate earnestly, almost angrily, on his certainty that Stephen could not possibly, in the face of such circumstances, persist in his desire to engage himself to Elsie Blake. It could not be thought of. He did not wish to

quarrel with his son, but to sanction such a connexion was a sheer impossibility, which, in sane moments, Stephen himself would not contemplate. He almost implored Cecil to assure him that she was as sanguine as to Stephen's reasonableness as he professed to be himself. When he paused for a comfortable answer, Cecil roused herself to speak with some difficulty.

"How could Steenie go away?" she said, in a tone that jarred on Mr. Pierrepont's feelings. "How could he leave her? I can't understand it."

"My dear, I wonder you don't see that it was the only wise, the only honourable thing to be done, though I don't give him the credit of it. The elder Miss Blake seems to be a very right thinking person, and to have behaved very well. She has forbidden him to come to the house, or to write to her niece for the present. She told him she was extremely anxious that no rash promises should be made, which could only lead to repentance and disappointment afterward. I have always believed her to be a very upright, proud person, and I can imagine she would be very unwilling to allow her niece to enter a family where her presence would be felt to be a disgrace. She would prefer any other lot, however humble or lonely, to that. It was, doubtless, a feeling of this kind which prevented her forming any marriage connexion herself."

"Of course it was," said Cecil; "I understand her. But Elsie, our poor Elsie, she is not proud or strong-minded. Loneliness and neglect will not be tolerable to her. Oh, why should she have to bear them? Why must she be punished for other people's sins?"

"It is inevitable," Mr. Pierrepont said, "and right too. 'The sins of the fathers,' you know——"

"O uncle, don't!" cried Cecil, the tears starting into her eyes. "That is just one of those things that go down into one's heart like a knife. I know it is true and just as it is meant there, only when it is applied in a case like this it does seem so terrible."

"There are many terrible things in the world one has to face," answered Mr. Pierrepont; "and no good ever comes of shutting one's eyes to them. Your father is a man of experience, and will, you will find, take the same view that I do."

"But did Steenie *promise* to be guided by Papa? That is another thing I can't understand. Such a question as this, I should have thought, a man must decide for himself. It will be very unlike Steenie to let Papa decide for him."

"He did not promise; but I reckon very much on your father's influence over him. In fact it rests with your father, for without my consent and assistance, Steenie cannot possibly marry for years to come; and I have engaged to abide by your father's decision, whatever it is."

"But even if they can't marry for years to come, they might be engaged and wait. Steenie is sure to get on eventually, either at the bar, or in some career that will open out for him if he goes abroad with Papa. That is what I expect they will decide to do," Cecil said, a little maliciously.

"It would be a miserable mistake," groaned Mr. Pierrepont. "Do you wish Steenie to cut himself off from all his friends and ruin his prospects for life? Would you have him take his father-in-law to live with him when he comes out of prison; and am I expected to open the Rectory to them, and let them come here? I wonder that you can think calmly of such a prospect."

Cecil did not make any direct answer to this appeal. "If only my father had seen her," she said musingly, after a pause. "He won't be able even to imagine what she really is. I wish I were in London just now."

"You are taking this in a very different spirit from what I expected," Mr. Pierrepont said reproachfully. "I thought you had your cousin's interest really at heart. Cecil, take care you are not carried away by girlish interest in a love story to act a part you may repent all your life. What will your feelings be hereafter if you use the influence you have to confirm Stephen in a course of conduct that will make a lasting breach between him and me? You can't think it right that he should set my wishes at nought in so serious a matter as this."

"No, no; of course not," cried Cecil eagerly. "I am only wishing it were possible that Papa should give his opinion in favour of an engagement being allowed; and then you know you have promised to reconcile yourself to it. Was that a drop of rain? Oh dear, I am afraid there is a storm coming on, and I want to go up the hill as soon as the letters have come, to try if I can see Elsie Blake."

"I beg you will do no such thing. I really must request very particularly that there may be no communication whatever between this house and the house on the hill while you remain here."

Cecil was going to remonstrate hotly, when the sharp sound of the postman's knock sent her flying through the house to take the letters from the servant in the hall.

"She came back with one only in her hand. "For me, not you," she said to Mr. Pierrepont, who met her half-way. "Yes, it is from Papa; but there will be nothing particular in it, for he will never suppose I know."

"Read it at all events," said Mr. Pierrepont breathlessly.

Cecil tore the envelope open and glanced quickly down the pages. At one point her countenance fell, and she uttered a little sound of vexation.

"Well?" asked Mr. Pierrepont.

"Oh, nothing," answered Cecil, colouring deeply; then looking up and observing an expression of anxious curiosity on her uncle's face, she made a great effort and added, "But I daresay you would like to read the last half page; begin here." She held the letter towards her uncle and re-perused the lines with him, till some tears starting to her eyes made her father's words illegible.

"I begin to wish I had let you come up to London a week or two ago," the letter ran. "I know how warm my Cecil's heart is, and how she throws herself headlong into her friends' concerns, making herself sometimes a little more busy in them than is quite wise or well for her own peace. I am afraid she is placed in rather trying circumstances just now, which call for more circumspection than I can credit her with. Seriously, my darling, I am uneasy about you, and I wish with all my heart I had not let you spend this long summer in Oldbury. I don't like to think of your having been made the confidant in a love affair which is likely to have a very painful termination. Not knowing how far you are involved, I cannot give you all the advice I should like to give. I only venture to say, be cautious, or rather be obedient. You are under your uncle's roof; don't say or do anything of which you think he would disapprove; and remember that this is too serious a matter for unauthorized meddling." There was a postscript scribbled in a corner, which Cecil had overlooked at first. "I open my letter to say that on second thoughts I had rather you came home to me as soon as possible. I know Grandmamma does not like to be hurried into a journey, so I shall not expect to see you till the end of the week. We must soon plunge into the business of preparations for our voyage to China, and you will have more than enough to do and think of. Steenie will write to his father tomorrow, and so shall I. We are having a great deal of talk about the secretaryship and other things. When we have come to any conclusion, we will write."

Mr. Pierrepont was surprised to see a round blot fall on the paper as he finished reading, and looking up he spied another on its way down Cecil's cheek."

"My dear," he said, "I thought you would be glad of a summons to London. You wished you were there a few minutes ago."

Cecil dashed the moisture from her eyes. Of course it was not to be expected that any one should understand what great pain the least shade of blame from her father gave her, or how deeply she was troubled by the prospect of a difference of opinion arising between herself and him.

"Grandmamma will take a week to make up her mind about going," she said. "It will be too late for me to do any good when I get there!"

"I don't know what you mean by doing any good," Mr. Pierrepont observed stiffly. "You always profess to have unbounded confidence in your father's goodness and wisdom, I should have thought you would not have presumed to seek to influence his judgment in any way."

"I am not to have the chance; I am ordered to do nothing," she said a little huskily, as she drew the letter from her uncle's hands and crushed it down with an impatient gesture to the bottom of her pocket. She had never served any letter of her father's so before.

Mr. Pierrepont passed on to his study, relieved of one-half of his load of apprehension, and Cecil flew upstairs to her grandmother's room to impart the news of their summons to London, and attempt to argue her into an admission that she could possibly encounter a three-hours' railway journey without having had an entire week to think about it beforehand.

A lengthened discussion of this question with Lady Selina did not tend to calm Cecil's temper or raise her spirits; and when, a few hours later, she rushed across the road through a storm of rain to call on Miss Berry, she was so unlike her usual bright self that that lady could not refrain from exclaiming about her dejected looks the instant she entered the room.

Cecil felt disgusted with herself for her want of command of countenance, when, after mysteriously closing the door behind her, Miss Berry looked up into her face and began—

"Ah, my dear, I see it is all true! You have heard the terrible news about the Blakes as well as I. I thought I read it in your face as you were crossing the street, and now I am sure."

"What terrible news!" said Cecil. "Let me take off my wet cloak and hat, dear Elderberry, and pray, pray don't look so doleful. You know I always tell you *never* to believe half or a quarter of what you hear in Oldbury."

"But, my dear, I am afraid you do believe this report about the Blakes. Oh, I have had such a dreadful afternoon! When I saw Miss Tomkinson coming up the street through the heaviest of the thunder-shower, my heart misgave me; for you know people don't come out in such a storm—at least not in Oldbury—unless they have a great deal of very bad news to tell. I thought of all the accidents that might possibly have happened. Whether it was the powder-mills on the other side of the river that had been blown up and everybody killed; or good Mrs. Adams taken in an apoplectic fit; but nothing half so terrible as what I did hear came into my head. I don't think I have ever been quite so miserable in my life. Apart from my affection for the parties concerned, there is the sense of responsibility. I shall feel all my life, and I am sure Mrs. Lutridge will always say, that it has been almost all my fault. I am afraid, in my agitation, that I said more about that part of the subject to Miss Tomkinson than was quite prudent."

"About what part?" asked Cecil, fairly puzzled.

"About all that went on in this room a few weeks ago which did not strike me so much at the time, because of my having you, my dear, so thoroughly fixed in my head for Stephen Pierrepont. Now I will confess something to you that troubles me a good deal—something I said myself. They were standing, your cousin Stephen and Elsie Blake, on the opposite side of the table there, talking together one evening, as I am sorry to say they were very much in the habit of doing, and I had just finished knitting a pair of socks, and was measuring the two together to see how they matched, and I said aloud, 'To be sure, what a handsome well fitted pair they were,' and your cousin looked up at me in the comical way he has, and said, 'Thank you, Elderberry; you really think so, do you?' My dear, do you know I believe now that he meant, not the socks, but himself and Elsie, and it does give me such a pang to-day to think it was, perhaps, that foolish speech of mine that put the whole thing into his head."

"Miss Tomkinson has been talking scandal about my cousin and Elsie Blake, then?" said Cecil. "She is the most arrant gossip in Oldbury. You may be sure she says a great deal more than she knows to be true."

"If I could but think so; but it was not so much about the young people she talked, though of course it is their engagement that makes the other revelation so terrible. It is this dreadful discovery that has come out about the Blakes she has been confiding to me. I can hardly put it into words; but it seems that we have been deceived in them all along. They are not Blakes at all; they have another name, of which they have reason to be ashamed. Mr. and Mrs. Blake have a son still living of whom we have never heard; he is Elsie's father, and Miss Tomkinson says he is actually in prison now, convicted of a crime—Miss Tomkinson says parricide; but I have been thankfully reflecting, since she left, it can't be quite that, for old Mr. Blake is certainly alive. Still, I am afraid it may be something nearly as bad, for Mrs. Lutridge has had several attacks of palpitation, and says that if murderers' families are to be allowed to flock to Oldbury there will be no knowing when we are safe."

"Where did all this cruel gossip spring from?" said Cecil in despair. "I hope, dear Miss Berry, you will do all you can to prevent its spreading in the town. True or untrue, think how cruel it is towards the Blakes for their neighbours to be circulating tales against them while poor old Mrs. Blake is dying. What business is it of anybody's in Oldbury?"

"My dear, the Blakes have been living in Oldbury sixteen years, and we see them every Sunday at church. It is not to be expected that we should not talk about them. It seems that Mrs. Lutridge has long had suspicions, and that they have been confirmed in an extraordinary manner through the instrumentality of Dr. Tomkinson, who is now staying in the town. He was called in to visit Mrs. Blake, and he recognized her and Miss Blake. He is doctor in one of the convict prisons, and he has actually seen them there—Mrs. Blake and Margaret in prison—with his own eyes! Oh, dear! Miss Tomkinson thought it her duty to acquaint Mrs. Lutridge with the circumstance at once; and yesterday, after having inquired and learned further particulars, she called on the Bodleys, and on several other families, and, my dear, I am afraid there is no use in hoping that the Oldbury people can be kept from talking about it, though every one seems to agree that no one but Mrs. Lutridge should venture to speak on the subject to poor Mr. Pierrepont. It is terrible for him. His son engaged to a murderer's daughter! It is enough to break his heart—and all our hearts; and when I think that it was at my house it all

happened—I don't, of course, mean the murder, but the engagement—I do feel as if I should never be able to hold up my head again."

"You think only of yourself and of my uncle; you do not seem nearly as sorry for Elsie Blake as I should have expected. I think you are very unfeeling, Elderberry," cried Cecil, who was by this time worried into an aggressive state of temper that made it a relief to find fault with some one.

This startling accusation drove Miss Berry to a fresh flood of tears; and when Cecil, repentant, attempted to console her, she, too, broke down utterly, and gave way to such a despairing fit of weeping that Miss Berry became thoroughly alarmed on her account.

"Let me go!" Cecil said, when by a great effort she had succeeded in calming herself. "No, I don't want any sal-volatile or anything! I am not ill, I am only silly. Please understand that I am thoroughly ashamed of myself for going on like this, and that you are not to think anything of it, or draw conclusions. I will come again to-morrow and behave better. You see it has done raining, and nothing will really do me good now but the air."

The wet streets were very still and empty when Cecil came out into them, and instead of turning in at the Rectory gates she walked on at a brisk pace down the lower part of the town out on to the road, till she came to the bridge over the Idle. There was nobody on it this afternoon. It was such a relief to her to be out of the house, and to feel the wind blowing freshly on her face, that she could not help lingering. She leant on the parapet of the bridge and looked down into the dark turbid water.

It had ceased raining, but heavy storm-clouds were rising from the west, and spreading themselves over the sky. Fitful gusts of wind came every now and then, and raved in the tree-tops, and tossed withering leaves and dead branches down into the river. The gloom suited Cecil's state of mind very well that afternoon. She let her thoughts glance back all through the weeks and days of the bright summer. What a time it had been! and now it was over, and everything was changed. The wind seemed to take the last word from her lips and moan it out over the whole country round; the trees tossed their arms in despair when it was brought to them; and the river made a long endless sigh of it as it rippled away under her feet.

She was almost frightened at the pain in her own heart.

Yes, it was true what her father said. She had been unconsciously mixing herself up too intimately in the lives of those two, whose hearts after all were each other's and not hers ; and now the blow that struck them wounded her more deeply than any one would be able to understand. She hardly dared ask herself why she was so very unhappy, why life looked so different to her now from what it had done when she used to cross that bridge in gay talk with her cousin on soft bright mornings and evenings in the early summer-time. It would be a never-to-be-forgotten summer to her ; it left her very different from what it found her. Oh, how was it that she had allowed this deep disturbance to invade her soul ?

It had not all come with the knowledge of her cousin's and Elsie's trouble. She remembered that she had not been able to rejoice in their happiness as she had intended to do, and that thought gave her quite an unreasonably strong pang of remorse now. She covered her eyes with her hands for a minute or two—there was no one to see her—and breathed a silent fervent prayer in her heart that she might be permitted to do something for her two friends ; to work generously for them, and help them to be faithful to each other, and that she might live to see them crowned with happiness in the end, without one thought of self coming in then to cloud her joy in their prosperity. She felt a great deal calmer and braver when she turned to walk home again, and managed to meet her uncle at dinner-time with a tolerably cheerful countenance.

CHAPTER XXIX.

MRS. LUTRIDGE ACTS FOR THE BEST.

WHEN the next morning came, Mr. Pierrepont rather repented having made a confidant of Cecil, for her extreme anxiety induced a vigilance on her part that was rather embarrassing to him. If she had been sympathizing fully with his wishes, it would have been all very well; they could have watched the post, and wished the early hours of the day away together in comfort. As it was, it irritated him to know that she was on the alert to hear everything that came to his knowledge, and to feel that, having already spoken so openly to her, he could hardly refuse to gratify the curiosity he had roused.

He heard with some impatience the drawing-room door open softly, just as he was opening the door of the library that he might catch the first sound of the postman's steps approaching; and when the expected knock came, he found it would be most dignified to stand still within the library doorway, so little chance was there of his being beforehand with the light figure that flew down the stairs and laid hands on the letters before the postman had finished slipping them into the box.

"I know I ought not to have done it," Cecil said apologetically, as she handed him his letters in at the door; "but I thought there might be a little line for me from Papa or Steenie, and I was in such a hurry to get it. They are all for you to-day."

Mr. Pierrepont's habitual graciousness failed him just then. He took the letters in silence, and closed the study door in Cecil's face.

She was too unhappy to be angry. She walked up and down the hall, and sat on the stairs watching the study, in the hope

that her uncle would come out and speak to her, or at all events that she should read on his face the character of the news he had received. What a long time he was studying the two thick letters she had handed him in ! Cecil roamed about the house twisting and wringing her small hands with impatience. It was raining heavily again, soft, persistent, melancholy rain, and she could not refresh herself by running out into the garden. She wandered into the breakfast-room at last, and looked mechanically out of the window. Presently a tall, imposing figure, cloaked, clogged, and umbrellaed, appeared in the distance of the empty wet street. No mistaking Mrs. Lutridge, or hoping that it was not the Rectory she was bearing down upon. Cecil took her resolution at once.

She walked straight to the library, entered without knocking, and closed the door behind her. Mr. Pierrepont was seated at his desk, his head resting dejectedly on his hand, and several sheets of paper spread out before him. Cecil went up and put her hand on his shoulder.

"Please don't be angry with me, Uncle," she said : "I have not any right to ask ; but won't you tell me what they say—what my father says at least?"

"Your father says just what I should have expected him to say," Mr. Pierrepont answered, rather sharply ; what any man of sense and experience must say. He knows the history of the Le Fevre family very well. He remembers the trial of this girl's father, and the great public indignation roused against him at the time by the disclosures that came out. He considers that I have every right to refuse my consent to my son's marrying the daughter of such a man—that I ought indeed to set my face against it ; since Steenie is too young, and, at present, not in a state of mind to judge what is for his real good. If I can prevent it, he must not be allowed to sacrifice himself."

Cecil's eyes had become fixed, while her uncle was speaking, on an unopened letter, directed in Stephen's handwriting, which lay on the desk, and she hardly heard the last sentence.

"Oh !" she could not help exclaiming, "there is a letter ! Steenie has written to her."

"Yes," said Mr. Pierrepont discontentedly, "it seems that her aunt has entreated him not to attempt any communication with her as long as my consent to their engagement is withheld, and he actually wants me to take this letter to her myself, to secure her being allowed to receive and answer it."

"Then he does not mean quite to give her up?" said Cecil eagerly.

"What he means just now will prove of very little consequence in the end. He cannot marry her at present, and it appears that her friends have sufficient principle not to allow her to enter into an engagement unsanctioned by me. Whatever promises for the future he may have made in that letter had much better have been left unwritten. Yes, you may read what he says to me if you like; he does not write in an undutiful spirit, but it is an extremely distressing and perplexing letter to me."

Cecil took the closely written sheets from her uncle's hand, and read rapidly, for her ears told her that the threatened interruption was imminent now. As she devoured the pages her heart beat faster and faster, and tears kept rushing up and inconveniently blinding her eyes. She liked the letter, every word. It was just what she would have expected Steenie to write, from her inmost knowledge of him, and yet it moved her strangely, as earnest words will when they come from a person who usually shows the lighter part of his character only.

In her breathless haste, it was rather the sense than the words she gathered. Stephen did not make light of the objections to his engagement which his father felt so strongly. He even said that if he had known all he now knew at the beginning of his attachment to Elsie, or even before he had spoken to her, he should have felt it his duty to keep out of her way. It might possibly have been better for him if he had known earlier. He would not say that it was not a great misfortune to have given his heart to one whose life was shadowed with so terrible a calamity. But he had done it, and now he could only abide by the consequences of his own act. She was not guilty, though the consequences of guilt rested on her, and he loved her well enough to wish to bear them with her. He did not expect his father to feel with him, or to give him credit for as much resolution and constancy as the course he had determined on called for. He did not venture to ask him to sanction either a marriage or an engagement between them at present, and he knew that Elsie's friends would not permit her to pledge herself to him without such sanction; but he had written to tell her that he should consider himself bound to her as long as she was free, and that she might trust him to claim her again as soon as he was in a position to marry, if her feelings towards him did not change in the meantime. He had also, he said, offered to

remain in England, instead of going abroad, if she wished it. Having written this, and meaning to abide by her decision on that point, he thought it right that his father should know what he had done; and he believed that he would not blame him when he came to think it over, however strong his first disapproval might be. There was more that Cecil could only glance at. Something about Margaret Blake's honourable scruples, and his fears lest she should prevent Elsie from writing her wishes freely to him, if his letter came to her in any other way than through his father's hands; and then came a very earnest appeal to his father to be kind to Elsie, and to spare Margaret's pride as much as he could if he were admitted to an interview with them, when he called to deliver the letter.

A peremptory tap at the study door came before Cecil's eyes had quite travelled down to the end of the last page. She laid her hand on the door to keep it shut while she restored the sheets to their envelope and laid the letter within Mr. Pierrepont's writing-desk. She could not bear the thought of Mrs. Lutridge's eyes resting on it.

"Uncle, I think he is right," she said. "I call it a noble letter. You will let Elsie have hers? You will do what he asks?"

"He is very inconsiderate towards me," Mr. Pierrepont said. "It is putting me in a most painful position. I had much rather not be brought into personal communication with these people, and my seeing them just now will occasion a great deal of gossip and misconception in the town."

There was an expression in Cecil's eyes, still fixed on his face, that Mr. Pierrepont did not at all like. A flash of indignation showing through their tears: "How can you think so much of how it affects yourself?" the eyes said.

Mr. Pierrepont was not accustomed to have his self-regardful speeches received in that fashion; to most of his friends, it was an acknowledged fact that there was nothing in the world of so much consequence as the maintenance of his influence in Oldbury. Cecil's reproachful look touched him, but only enough to make him cross.

"I think," he observed, "that you had better stand out of the way, and allow the person who has been waiting some time at the door to come in. I really have not any more time to give up to you this morning. There are other things besides our own private concerns to be attended to."

Cecil escaped the minute the door was opened to admit Mrs.

Lutridge, and that lady burst in, too full of what she had to say to notice Miss Russel's hasty departure.

The sympathy expressed in Mrs. Lutridge's face was not altogether ungrateful to Mr. Pierrepont, irritated as he was by Cecil's unexpected opposition. She came in holding out both hands for Mr. Pierrepont to shake.

"Dear friend," she began, "you see what a day it is, but I could not allow the rain to keep me away from you an hour longer. How my heart has been bleeding for you and for our dear Stephen during the last two days! All over the town there is nothing talked of but this dreadful disclosure about the Blakes, and the misery which your son's unfortunate attachment to that poor girl must occasion you. Confirmation of Dr. Tomkinson's story appears to rise up on every side, and the whole place is in a most painful state of agitation. How does Stephen bear it?"

"He is away in London at present," said Mr. Pierrepont; "let us put him out of the question altogether. Cannot you do anything to stop the reports you speak of? True or untrue, it is great cruelty to the Blakes that such rumours should be spread abroad just now, when they have already sufficient trouble upon them."

"My dear friend, I feel for the Blakes as deeply as you do, but when I consider the peril to which our dear families have been exposed, I cannot but rejoice that we have been undeceived in time. I shudder to think what might have happened. I have had fears—I don't mind confessing it to you now—serious fears on my dear Richard's account; and in looking back I remember a period when you yourself were drawn into a degree of intimacy, which might have led—perhaps I am going too far in asking you to imagine what the result at that time might possibly have been."

Mr. Pierrepont made a hasty movement in his chair and muttered some incoherent negatives, which Mrs. Lutridge interpreted into a refusal even to imagine the result she hinted at; and warned from this old subject of speculation, she reverted to the state of public opinion in Oldbury respecting the Blakes, upon which she had called to deliberate.

Mr. Pierrepont interrupted her now and then to put in a word or two of excuse for the conduct of the Blake family in concealing their antecedents from their Oldbury neighbours, or to recall to her recollection the various attempts to induce them to take part in the society of the place, which they had strenu-

ously resisted when they first came to the town. Yet even while he was defending them from unjust blame, his vexation and dismay grew stronger and stronger. It was an intense annoyance to him to hear his son's name mixed up in the flood of exaggerated talk and gossip which Mrs. Lutridge poured into his ear. He glanced at the letter on his desk, and disliked the thought of the task Steenie had imposed on him more than ever. At last Mrs. Lutridge rose to go; and just as she was shaking hands, her eyes fell on the letter addressed to Miss Elsie Blake, in Stephen's handwriting, which lay on the desk. Her eyebrows and eyelids elevated themselves to their utmost capacity.

"Oh!" she exclaimed (for there was no inpertinence to which intense curiosity, mingled with spite, could not tempt her). "So he does correspond with the young lady! I am sorry for that. I was in hopes, from what you said, that things had not gone quite so far. I do feel for you, it is a most disastrous business indeed."

"No, no; there is no correspondence," said Mr. Pierrepont hastily, "and I hope you will contradict any gossip of that kind you may hear as decidedly as possible. I do not deny that there has been a certain degree of attachment, such as will arise when young people are thrown together; but I must do Miss Blake the justice to say that she is far too upright a person to sanction anything between her niece and my son of which I disapprove. Stephen is most probably going abroad with his uncle shortly, and this is a farewell letter which he has requested me to convey."

"Indeed! and you will actually see her? What a painful task for you, my dear friend; and how liable to be misconstrued. Do you think that you are the best person to do it? Is it not exposing yourself to unnecessary agitation and persuasion? Could I not spare you the painful scene by undertaking the delivery of this letter myself? I shall pass the house on my way home, and I was thinking of calling and insisting on an interview with some member of the family, that I might give them a friendly word of warning about what is now being said against them in the town, and counsel them as to what their conduct ought to be in the present painful crisis of their affairs. I should have no objection to see the young lady too; I would make a point of it. I would speak to her just as I should do if my own precious only son's interests were concerned—affectionately and faithfully, as I hardly think it would be possible for you to speak. Shall it not be as I say?"

Mr. Pierrepont did not answer immediately, and Mrs. Lutridge stretched her hand over his shoulder, and lifted the letter from the desk.

"Yes," she said, "you feel with me that this is best, and I need not say how thankful I am of an opportunity of sparing you. It will not be the first time that I have taken on myself to act as a mother might do in what concerns our dear Stephen."

Mr. Pierrepont stood irresolute, with his eyes fixed on the letter, silently watching it on its way to the leather reticule, already stuffed with papers, in which Mrs. Lutridge was prepared to engulf it. Just as the steel mouth opened to snap it up, he put out his hand to stop it. Mrs. Lutridge dropped the letter in, and brought the steel lips together with a sounding snap.

"Yes, my acting for you in this matter will save a great deal of publicity and scandal. You would probably not have been received the first time you called—you would have had to make repeated visits; and it is not as if you were in the habit of going to the house. It is years since you have been within their doors. They have actually sent for the clergyman of the district church to administer the Sacrament to Mrs. Blake since she has been ill. What stronger proof of a guilty conscience towards you could they have given?"

"No, no, not that; their conduct towards me is entirely blameless," said Mr. Pierrepont quickly. "But it is true enough that circumstances have occurred which may well make Miss Blake prefer to receive this communication from you rather than from me. I may trust you to make her understand that the letter is sent with my knowledge and consent, and to let her know that I do not blame her or her niece in the smallest degree for anything that has passed."

"You may depend on me to act with true kindness and discretion. I am not one of those selfish people who, from a cowardly fear of taking responsibility on themselves, refrain from acting in their neighbours' concerns when they can be of service. I wonder what state Oldbury would be in if I were?"

Mr. Pierrepont did not seem disposed to enter into that question just then. He shook hands almost in silence, and in another moment Mrs. Lutridge found herself outside the house, with her umbrella and her cloak and the soaking rain. She did not immediately turn her face homewards; the rain did not daunt her. She preferred a very rainy day for calling on her

friends. She liked coming into their houses with damp face and hair, and dispersing the drippings of her cloak and umbrella over their sanded floors or neat carpets. It carried an impression of self-devotion to their minds, which must, Mrs. Lutridge considered, greatly add to the edification of her visits.

She was far too wet and uncomfortable looking to-day to think of going home quietly; and there were the Miss Tomkinsons at the other end of the town, who would be quite as grateful to her for coming to them through the rain, and giving them the earliest information of her interview with Mr. Pierrepoint, as her self-love demanded.

Perhaps she might even tell them about Stephen's letter, and edify them with a foretaste of the advice she meant to season it with when she gave it to Elsie—shrinking, timid, dove-eyed Elsie, whom it would no doubt be well to warn against attempting fresh conquests, now that her first prize was slipping away from her. Mrs. Lutridge thought out some very judicious and vigorous sentences as she trudged resolutely along.

There was a narrow little street running by the river-side, the opening of which had to be passed before you came to the bridge, beyond which the Tomkinsons' house was situated. Some of the poorest people in Oldbury lived there, and among the wretchedest of their houses Margaret Blake might be sometimes seen coming in and out. They were the only houses she had ever entered in Oldbury but her own. She chanced to be just returning from one of these visits of mercy when Mrs. Lutridge reached the corner of the street. That vigilant lady's eye fell upon her while she was still distant some paces, and scanned her curiously as she approached. The hood of her grey cloak was drawn over her bonnet, and the struggle with the wind and rain had given a temporary animation and colour to her face, which brought back to it, for the moment, a good deal of the peculiar proud beauty of which Mrs. Lutridge had hated the sight when it had first startled Oldbury, and been a topic of remark to everybody. What a firm light step she had! She was holding her head higher than usual, as if some proud or defiant thought was in her mind. Mrs. Lutridge looked at her with amazement. Was this the way in which she, who was creating so much disturbance in the place, bore the disaffection of all her neighbours? Such an unbecoming spirit deserved to be taken down and humbled.

Margaret had in fact undergone a great deal of agitation that morning. In the course of her visits she had become aware of

the suspicion and ill-will that was being excited in the town against herself and her family, and Mrs. Lutridge's name had been mentioned to her as the author of reports which she feared would sooner or later drive them away from Oldbury.

Her heart was very full of indignation against the person who had wantonly brought this new calamity upon them, and she was in no mood for amicable conversation when she perceived that Mrs. Lutridge was lingering for the purpose of intercepting her at the corner of the road.

She attempted to slip past with a haughty bend of the head, but Mrs. Lutridge stood full in the path and laid a hand on her arm.

"Miss Blake, excuse my stopping you, but I have a question of importance to ask. Are you aware that I have myself called four times at your house within the last two days, and been rudely denied admittance, though I sent in an express message that I was anxious to speak privately with you."

"I did not know that you had given yourself that trouble so often," said Margaret quietly. "Our servant has orders to explain that we do not receive visitors. If she did not make the message clear to you, I am sorry."

"But, Miss Blake, surely there are exceptional circumstances. I do not look on myself altogether in the light of an ordinary visitor. I called yesterday, and I propose to come to your house again to-day, to speak to you in a friendly spirit on matters which deeply concern yourself and your family; and I must say that I consider that I deserve more courteous treatment than to have the door closed in my face."

"I will not keep you standing longer in the rain, as it is quite useless for us to discuss the question," Margaret interrupted, with another haughty bow and an attempt to move forward, which Mrs. Lutridge circumvented by tightening her grasp on the arm she held.

"But, Miss Blake, a moment's patience. I really must insist on your hearing me. I have a very special occasion to see your niece. I am entrusted with a communication to her from Mr. Pierrepont, whose house I have just left, and who is, as you will easily imagine, much concerned at certain events that have recently transpired. I have promised to deliver it to her myself, and I cannot suppose that you will have any objection to her seeing me. I shall call about an hour hence, and I trust that by that time you will have given your servant orders to admit me, and that I shall not again

have the annoyance of being turned away from your door—a thing, Miss Blake, to which, I can assure you, I am wholly unaccustomed in Oldbury.”

Margaret's large eyes flashed. “I advise you not to trouble yourself to call,” she said. “You will certainly not be admitted. I deny your right to speak to me on matters which concern myself or my family. I cannot prevent your saying what you please of us out of our house, but you certainly shall not speak to any one within it. I shall carefully guard my niece from receiving any communication from any one through you. Good morning.”

Mrs. Lutridge's detained hand was paralysed by absolute amazement that any one should have the audacity to speak to her in such a tone, and to look at her with such haughty eyes. Margaret shook her off unceremoniously, and proceeded on her way up the hill. Mrs. Lutridge stared after her for quite a minute before she could believe that she was actually gone and did not mean to come back to apologize, and then she turned round and continued her walk towards the bridge in a very bewildered state of mind. Never had she been so addressed since the day when she married Mr. Lutridge, and became, in virtue of his wealth and her own determination, the leading lady in Oldbury. Could it really be Oldbury where such an insult had been offered to her? She began to wish heartily that she had not so eagerly undertaken the delivery of this letter. She did not like the thought of exposing herself to Margaret's rudeness again; and yet it would be very disagreeable, after all she had said, to return it to Mr. Pierrepont, and confess her failure. By the time she had reached the bridge she was in such a breathless state of agitation that she was obliged to pause for a moment, and lean against the parapet to recover herself. She slipped her hand into her reticule, and took out Steenie's letter. She disliked the look of it now as much as Mr. Pierrepont had done; and then, after all, who could say what was in it? She put down her umbrella—it was hardly raining at all now—and held up the letter against the light. The envelope was large and thin, and the writing distinct, and her eye deciphered a sentence or two that made it seem by no means the sort of farewell letter Mr. Pierrepont had implied it was. What a shame if the Blakes and his son were deceiving him!

He was not a very strong-minded man, and Mrs. Lutridge had known him give way before in matters where his son was

concerned, and act against her most strenuous advice. Suppose it should be so again. If the Blakes should triumph after all, and Elsie reign at the Rectory, in the position about which Mrs. Lutridge had at one time or another woven so many visions ! Oldbury would not be tolerable as a residence if such an event as that came to pass ; and yet it might happen if the letter she held reached Elsie Blake unaccompanied with any advice from her. It would be a thousand times better for every one concerned if she never got it—a great deal more what Mr. Pierrepont really wished. Half unconsciously, as this thought passed through her mind, her fingers relaxed their hold on the envelope ; an opportune little gust of wind came. It was all done in a moment. There was a white square of paper fluttering over and over in the air far below the reach of her outstretched hand, which made a desperate clutch to regain it. A white spot on the water beneath, lessening, lessening, lessening, as it rose and fell on successive wavelets, till Mrs. Lutridge's straining eyes could discern it no longer, and then no trace of what had happened anywhere—nothing to be seen by staring down ever so intently at the gurgling, hurrying river, which was not at all likely to bring back anything that had been once entrusted to its keeping ! A large drop of rain falling plump on Mrs. Lutridge's nose roused her from her stupified gaze at last. She slowly put up her umbrella, and resumed her walk.

"It was an accident," she said to herself ; "but even if it had not been, I should consider that, under the circumstances, and after the manner in which Miss Blake treated me, I was quite justified in taking upon myself to act for the best. Oh no, I don't feel the least uneasy. I am quite satisfied that it is the best thing for all parties that could have happened."

A long course of acting for the best in other people's concerns had brought Mrs. Lutridge's conscience into a very quiescent state, yet she did feel some unaccustomed prickings when in the course of the afternoon she sat down to write the result of her mission to Mr. Pierrepont. She had so much comfortable obtuseness and self-sufficiency that it did not often happen to her to find it difficult to render to others such an account of her doings as ministered to her own complacency. To-day she was surprised to discover that she could not put the story of the letter into any words that she liked to imagine Mr. Pierrepont reading. After several attempts, she contented herself with scribbling a few hasty lines :—

"I saw Miss Blake to-day, after I left you. I will tell you

all particulars when we meet, if you like to hear them ; but if you should prefer not to recur to so painful a subject, I think you may rest in the assurance that I have done the best I could for all parties, and that you have been spared what would certainly have been an embarrassing interview."

Mr. Pierrepont received the note when he returned from a round of parochial visiting late in the afternoon. Cecil watched him go out and come in ; but in compunction for her overboldness in the morning, she did not venture to ask any questions. He looked very miserable and worried, and ate nothing at dinner. Cecil guessed that this afternoon had been a trying one, and was very sorry for him, though she felt too much in disgrace to venture on any attempt to cheer him. They hardly spoke all the evening. It was not till quite late, long after Lady Selina had retired to her room, that Cecil stole back to the library for her writing-desk, and then took courage to linger an instant by her uncle's chair, and say softly—

"She has had the letter, has she not?"

"Yes," Mr. Pierrepont answered shortly ; "and if you are going to write to Steenie you may tell him so. I don't feel equal to writing to-night."

Cecil's letter to Steenie took some time to compose. She had been in the constant habit of corresponding with him, and had never had any difficulty when he was away before in filling sheet after sheet with merry descriptions of home doings. To write on a grave subject was a different thing ; and she felt depressed by the thought that, in spite of all her persistence, she had not been able to learn anything that he would care to know, that would make her poor little letter of consequence to him.

"I am in a horrible state of disgust with myself," she wrote at last. "I worried my uncle with my anxiety this morning, and took such liberties that I have almost made him hate me, and yet I have learned nothing of what you will most care to be told. I am afraid I must confess that your father looks very, very unhappy, and that I don't in the least know how to comfort him. I wish I had more sense. I almost forced him to show me the letters this morning, and now I think I did very wrong, and shame for my bad manners has kept me silent to-night. I saw him go out and come in, and I know he took the letter to her as you asked, but I have not dared to ask a single question about how she received it. How angry you will be with me.

"But I think you would have been as silent yourself if you had seen his worried face to-night. He just told me she had the letter, and that was all he said. Do you know, I think that, considering how unhappy he is, it was very good of him to let her have it at once, and that we must not quarrel with him for not talking about it? The letter must have comforted her; I try to satisfy myself with that thought. Miss Berry called at the house late this afternoon, and heard that Mrs. Blake had suddenly become much worse, and is not expected to live many days. She thought she got a glimpse of Elsie's head at the window of one of the upper rooms. That is all I can tell you; and now I must go to bed. I hope, meagre as this is, that you will like it a little better than getting no letter at all. Your father says he cannot write just yet."

Mrs. Lutridge took a very severe cold in consequence of her wet walk on the day of her interview with Mr. Pierrepont, and suffered from its effects more severely than was usual with her. For some days she was restless and feverish, and could not with all her efforts banish the thoughts of that walk through the rain from her mind. Whenever she closed her eyes the wavelets of the Idle whirled and swam before them, and in her dreams she was always bending frantically over the parapet of the bridge to catch something that floated out of her grasp. She grew seriously alarmed about her own state of health. "It was clear," she observed to Mr. Lutridge, "that at length her constant exertions for the welfare of her neighbours and the good of Oldbury were beginning to tell upon her." Dr. Tomkinson, who was called in, prescribed change of scene and complete relaxation from all her ordinary occupations; and, to the intense joy of all her daughters, Mrs. Lutridge consented to believe that it would be possible for her to leave Oldbury to take care of itself for a while. A visit to Boulogne, which they had long been struggling to obtain, was decided on all in a hurry; and on the very next Sunday the National School children exchanged congratulatory glances with each other as they pointed to the Lutridges' great red-lined pew with nothing more formidable than Mr. Lutridge's meek bald head showing over its side.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH.

THE first days and weeks that pass after the advent of a great affliction are not by any means those of severest suffering. While grief is allowed to retain undivided sway over the heart, while the head is bowed low for all the waves of woe to pass over it, there is a sense of rest in utter self-abandonment which, in an after-time, when the struggle to stand up under the bitter waters has begun, we look back upon with envy of ourselves for having felt. It is a kind of death that has come into our hearts. For a little while all our faculties lie benumbed and stilled ; what we dread is the awakening. We know the pain that is coming, but we don't feel it just at first. We keep it outside of us a little time, holding it mentally at arms' length while we look in its terrible face and learn its likeness. "Oh," we groan, "if we could escape having to stand up and fight it ; if the chill of the first touch would but strike deep enough and end all for us ; if we need never drag the bleeding life up from the ground again and know the full torture of the wounds that have hardly begun to ache yet. From this dumb stage of grief to the first faint glow of victory and healing there is a weary, weary road, a valley of the shadow of death, which every one who enters in has to traverse alone.

Margaret understood this ; she was very patient with Elsie in the first days of bewildered misery that followed Stephen's departure from Oldbury. She did not make any useless attempts to comfort her or reason with her, or urge the duty of resignation upon her. The time for these would come, but it was not yet. Elsie was thankful to be let alone. It was not her lover only she had lost, it was her whole life—all her

dreams in the past, all her hopes and thoughts of herself in future—that had been shattered by a single blow.

It was long, very long, before any coherence of thought came. Her recollection of the interview in the library was full of vague horror. She was like a person in a nightmare dream; wandering among unsightly heaps of ruins, and turning shudderingly away from one dismal sight after another only to meet the same ghastly desolation everywhere. The mere sound of Margaret's voice at times made her feel sick with pain. Let her be speaking of what she would, the low, quiet tones always seemed to Elsie to have in them the terrible words that had destroyed all her happiness and killed her very self—as she believed then.

The one thing that saved her from sinking under her grief, was the necessity for exertion which her grandmother's increasing illness laid upon her.

"Miss Elsie, you must not let yourself be ill," Crawford urged continually. "Think of her who has been good to you ever since you were born, and don't give her the pain of missing you just the last days, when you can comfort her by looking as usual. You can look as you like when she is gone."

The motive for self-restraint was the strongest that could have been put before Elsie. She did her best, and was benefited by having to turn her thoughts from herself. She went in and out of her grandmother's room, and sat long hours by her bedside, and never omitted any of the services she had been accustomed to perform for her; but all her efforts could not conceal the change that had come over her from the fond old eyes that never, while there was consciousness in them, ceased to study her face.

The wistful question in her grandmother's eyes, which her lips could not frame, went down into Elsie's heart, and gave her the relief of a change of pain. That mute expression of sympathy was the only one she could have borne to receive just then.

One day when she was off her guard, believing her grandmother to be asleep, and had thrown herself down on the ground in a paroxysm of mental anguish such as makes the body instinctively seek the lowest position as the fittest to be in, she was startled by hearing Mrs. Blake call her name in a distincter tone than she had uttered for many days.

"Elsie, darling, come to me."

The stricken figure struggled to raise itself in the bed, and

the withered arms to stretch themselves out to her in the old protecting motherly way. Elsie rose with a cry, and threw herself on the bed by her grandmother's side.

"What can I do? Help me," she sobbed. The dead sullen weight of pain was lifted from her heart. She felt as if an iron band that had held her thoughts imprisoned, and prevented her seeking Divine or human aid, had been struck away, and she was free to indulge the natural yearning for sympathy and comfort once more.

"What shall I do? How can I ever bear my life? Tell me," she repeated, propping her head on her elbow, and gazing at Mrs. Blake's face as if her only hope depended on her being able to speak again.

There was a painful effort, and then the trembling lips formed another distinct word. "Pray," Mrs. Blake at last said, "pray."

Elsie laid her head back on the pillow again, and strove hard to subdue her sobs and moans into quietness. A sense of peace and rest and withdrawal out of herself crept over her as she lay by her grandmother's side. Mrs. Blake's lips continued to murmur indistinct sounds, and Elsie's ear was so near them that she could, by catching a clearly uttered word here and there, make out the sentence she was repeating over and over to herself.

"Oh, how many and great troubles and sorrows hast Thou showed me! and yet——"

Memory apparently did not supply the succeeding verses of the psalm from which she was quoting, for she always paused at the same word; but her eyes said the rest. They were fixed and raised, seeing something, Elsie perceived plainly enough, other than what she saw—something that lay beyond the many and great troubles, the near perception of which dwarfed them all now into matters of simple, wondering, childish inquiry. "'How many and great troubles hast Thou showed me,' Thou whom I perceive to have been behind them all, compared to whom sorrows and joys are alike vain, transitory shows!"

An awful but sustaining sense of the reality and nearness of the unseen came into Elsie's heart as she watched her grandmother's face.

"You will go, and I shall be left to bear alone," she was tempted to murmur; but, with her head resting against her grandmother's pale cheek and her arms round her, she could

not feel the difference between the beginning and the end so very great, or count the life that lay between of so much importance as it had seemed a few hours before. She awoke out of the deadness and hardness of despairing sorrow and began the battle of life again.

Mrs. Blake never spoke distinctly again after that day; but she watched Elsie with pitying, wistful eyes to the very end, and Elsie knew that her last thoughts and last murmured prayers were for her. It was a gradual, silent, breathless creeping of death into the still, shut-up house. As the days passed, Elsie could not help feeling that to others as well as herself this was an exceptional interval of time, not to be taken into account in judging of their doings. Things could not go on like this for ever; air and sunshine and news from the outer world must come at last. They were not all dead and forgotten; people's recollection of them could not be altogether blotted out; a return to their every-day course of life must inevitably come, and names never pronounced now would be heard again in her ears. Her first effort after resignation, which gave renewed life to her heart, was succeeded by a little feeble upspringing of hope. Pain and struggle came with it, but it was healthier than despair. She was seized with a vehement longing to go out of the house and see fresh faces, and hear—yes, that was it—just hear Stephen Pierrepont's name mentioned, and listen while people spoke of him as if he were alive and real. The way in which he had slipped from her in the darkness of her swoon had left a very painful impression on her mind. Nothing, she thought, would bridge over the horror so well as hearing commonplace talk about him from people who knew nothing of her misery. She wanted to have her old impression of him restored; when she could recall his face as she had always seen it but that once, gay, courageous, happy, with love in his eyes when he looked at her; a sensation of warmth came back to her heart. She could not then believe that he would turn away from her, and leave her to suffer alone. He loved her; and what did love mean but faithfullest sharing together of sorrow, and joy, and pain, till life ended. She strove to think this, but she could never keep the happy recollection for long together; a vision of his face as she had last seen it, when he stood listening to Margaret in the library, always came and blotted out the other brighter picture. What was there in his eyes when he had looked up at last? What sort of resolution was it that had made his lips pale, and contracted

his brows with pain? Elsie used to sit for hours by her grandmother's bed-side in a sort of trance, staring into the dim corners of the darkened room, and trying to bring back that face before her eyes and read it.

When Margaret came behind her, as she often did, and put her arm round her neck and recalled her to the duties of the sick-room by some little word, the effort to pluck her thoughts back, and understand what was going on round her, gave her a sensation of positive physical pain. There lay the still form on the bed, where life was slowly, surely, noiselessly ebbing into eternity, and she had been letting her heart grow hot and restless with selfish anxieties and cares.

"My poor child," Margaret said one evening, when, during the day, Elsie's restlessness had taken the form of constant paces backwards and forwards, and startings at every foot-fall on the gravelled walk outside the house—"My poor darling, the one thing I have dreaded for you is uncertainty, heart-sick, waiting for what will never come. You may not think so now; but, indeed, long-continued anxiety is the worst pain of all. I have tried to save you from it, though, perhaps, you will quarrel with what I have done. It is not his fault that he does not come or write to you. I made him promise not to attempt to draw you into an unsanctioned engagement. I stipulated that he should tell his father all, and do nothing against his wishes. It was my duty to require this. We must not forget our self-respect, Elsie. We must not spread evil; I have always striven earnestly not to do that. We must be careful not to thrust our burdens on those who are not called to bear them, who can stand aloof if they please."

"But he can't stand aloof, he loves me!" said Elsie; "I thought so at least, I thought so."

"Yes," said Margaret gravely; "but, my poor child, you have still to learn that love does not mean the same to every one. There are many other considerations that weigh with men besides love. In such a case as this no one could blame him for giving you up."

And then Margaret, taking Elsie's hand and holding it firmly, as one who holds a patient's hand while a painful operation is endured, began for the first time to speak to her of her father; a few little, low-spoken words, with many pauses between. She talked first of his boyhood, when she had been the petted baby-sister, and he the admired, protecting elder brother. She told how his mother had doted on him; how she

used to miss him when he went away to school and college ; and how his return had always been the signal for festivity and rejoicing in their quiet studious household. Then a little later, after his marriage, how they had wondered and sometimes trembled a little at his sudden worldly prosperity. How rumours of the splendid gay life he and his beautiful wife were leading reached them in their comparative obscurity. And then Margaret paused for a long time, and, when she spoke again, took up her history at a different point. She described the long years of degradation and punishment, comprising nearly all Elsie's life, which he had worn through ; told how terrible his remorse had been ; what an old, wearied-out, feeble man he was now , how all through his worst times of suffering the thought of seeing his child again, and winning her love before she should have heard anything to turn her heart from him, had been his one stronghold of comfort. Margaret said she had never felt it right that Elsie should be kept in ignorance of her father's history. She had wished to prepare her from the first for the life of self-renunciation which (according to her views) her father's crimes entailed on her ; but there had been a promise made which her grandfather and grand mother felt bound to keep, and she had been obliged to acquiesce against her judgment.

Elsie sat low on the ground while Margaret talked, trying hard to suppress the shudderings that would come over her at some of the words that fell so familiarly from Margaret's lips ; endeavouring to force her thoughts to take in the image of that miserable sin-stained man, who was the reality that lay behind the bright dream of an ideal father she had so often pleased herself with calling up ; praying earnestly, in the pauses of Margaret's speech, for strength to overcome the horror of him —the bitter, hard resentment against him as the destroyer of all her happiness in life, which threatened to surge up in her heart and drown the pity Margaret's words were meant to excite.

"He is your father, and you are the only person in the world who can comfort him," Margaret said. "He can never see his father or mother, or me, without remembering what we have suffered through him. We only bring him pain. But he hopes to come before you as one restored from the dead, and to begin a new life with you, unembittered by sorrowful memories. Dearest, I must say this to you, don't let your own loss and pain shut your heart against him. I know what the struggle will be. Have I not struggled and failed often, and learned at

last that victory can only be gained in the strength of Him who knew how to suffer for all, and yet love all? Is it not something to have to struggle that we may enter into His Spirit, and live in the shadow of His cross?"

Elsie looked up suddenly into Margaret's face. It had not the still, passionless look it usually wore; there was a high heroic expression, almost a halo of glory resting on it. Yet it did not look beautiful to Elsie at that moment. She turned away her head with a petulant movement of pain. The strain was too high for her just then. She looked back on Margaret's life, and thought of all the years of it she could remember—the silent, joyless years that had slipped on and worn and moulded her face to the look it wore now. Oh, what a hard won victory! Her soul sickened and died within her at the prospect of having to tread such a dreary round to gain an end so far, so very far, beyond her present comprehension.

"But it is dreadful," she said, "to think of so many people suffering all through their lives for one other person's sin. It seems hard that so many should be dragged into the punishment who had no share in the sin."

"Hard, and yet hopeful, I think," said Margaret, "if we can only learn to look upon our losses and griefs as evidence of our communion in the work of the Great Atoner. But I will not say more to you now, dearest, for it will not help you yet; sustaining thoughts will come to you, as they have come to me." And Margaret stooped down and kissed Elsie's forehead softly, and they kept the rest of their long night-watch together in silence.

CHAPTER XXXI.

PARTING.

EARLY in the morning of the next day, the moment they had been so long dreading came. Mrs. Blake breathed her last breath tranquilly, and there was an end of all their loving tendance and anxiety for her. The change seemed so slight at first, that it was difficult to realize what had happened. The full understanding of their loss came with the painful sense of leisure that fell on them when the beloved face was finally hidden from their eyes, and the room where they had been spending the greater part of their time was left vacant.

Elsie was free then to wander about the house, and stand looking at the little slit in the door through which Cecil's letter had come to her with a vague thought in her mind that while she was watching it there was a greater likelihood than there had ever been before of another letter falling through at her feet; and she could lean on the garden wall late in the afternoons, and watch the little lights springing up in the town at her feet, and try to make out the windows of the Rectory for an hour or so at a time without any one reproving her, or noticing what she was doing.

She had fits of remorse for being able to grieve for anything but the loss she had sustained, and she missed her grandmother more sorely every day as the impression of the last weeks of suffering faded from her mind, and her thoughts reverted to earlier days, when Mrs. Blake had been her constant, loving, gentle companion, and cheerful playmate.

"How could she be that?" Elsie asked herself. "How could she?"

Her grandmother's peaceful, tender resignation was a greater

problem to her now than Margaret's sadness had been in the old time. Sometimes, as she recalled the sweet even tones of Mrs. Blake's voice, and her gentle smile that had never changed or failed, she grew impatient, and almost rebelled against the memory, or rather against the lesson it read her.

"How could she have attained to such grace? How could she?" Elsie understood now, and trembled at the thought of the dire struggles and terrible pains that must have been endured before that peace had been reached. She felt like a traveller entering on a dark cavern, where a dim, far-off spot of light only seems to show the hopeless distance from the entrance to the end. Margaret had many serious anxieties, quite unconnected with Elsie's, that pressed on her during the days that preceded and followed Mrs. Blake's funeral. Much necessary business not usually undertaken by the women of a family fell on her, and she was struck and pained by the manner towards her of the people with whom she had to deal. There was a rude curiosity and want of respect shown her, such as she had never before had to endure from Oldbury townspeople even in the days of their unpopularity, when they first came to the town.

The churchyard was very much crowded with spectators on the afternoon of Mrs. Blake's funeral; and pre-occupied as Margaret was, she overheard words and saw curious looks directed towards them which convinced her that the unhappy circumstances of their family history had become the subject of common gossip and notoriety throughout Oldbury. Could it be the Pierreponts' doing. The suspicion made Margaret very angry when she thought it over, and came to the conclusion that from no other source than this could have come the information that was causing so much excitement. Mrs. Lutridge had been active in spreading it no doubt, but she must have heard the tale from one of them at first. Margaret grew more and more hopeless on Elsie's account, as she meditated on this proof of want of consideration for their feelings, and felt impatient to take her away from the neighbourhood of the Pierreponts, beyond the risk of encounters that could only bring embarrassment and pain.

Other events speedily occurred to show how unfit a place of residence Oldbury was for people who had a weak place in their history, of which its inhabitants had an inkling. The very first time after the funeral that old Mr. Blake ventured out to walk in the road, he was annoyed by groups of children collecting to

stare after him, and call him by a name he had not been addressed by for twenty years. He had a terrible fit of nervous irritation when he re-entered the house, and Margaret was convinced of the necessity of getting him away from Oldbury as quickly as possible. She had long since made arrangements for giving up their house in the spring of the ensuing year. She had always felt that it would not be desirable to bring her brother to live in Oldbury; and now the term of his imprisonment was drawing to a close. The representations of friends, whose services in his behalf they secured during their last absence from home, had availed to procure a remittance of some years of his punishment, and they hoped to have him restored to them early in the coming spring. Instead of remaining in Oldbury till within a week or two of his release, Margaret now determined to make the meditated change of abode at once. They had still friends and relations in London, on whose kindness in cases of emergency they could rely. Since Elsie now knew her father's history there was no longer any necessity for keeping her apart from them, and during the days that succeeded Mrs. Blake's death Margaret talked a good deal to Elsie about her unknown relations, and tried to interest her in the prospect of seeing them soon.

Elsie heard with surprise that her mother's mother, Mrs. Neale, was still living, and that it was to her house Margaret and Mr. and Mrs. Blake had gone during those periodical absences from home, which had for their chief object the sad visit to the prisoner at Dartmoor they had never failed to make twice every year. Mrs. Neale lived alone for the greater part of the year in her house in London.

There had always been, Margaret told Elsie, a close intimacy between the Neales and the Le Fevres, even before the marriage of Elsie's father and mother had connected them.

The two families lived in neighbouring squares in London, and spent several weeks of every autumn together at Thoresby, the Neales' old rambling manor-house in Yorkshire, about which Elsie had heard, and built castles in the air in her childhood. Margaret did not speak much of the old times, but Elsie gathered enough from words dropped here and there to understand the principal events that preceded the break-up of the family. She learned how her merry, light-hearted mother had been wooed and won almost before she had passed beyond the years of her childhood, and how her bright butterfly life had been crushed out at once by the weight of the trouble that

came. The names of her mother's two brothers, Walter and Gilbert Neale, were seldom mentioned by Margaret in her narratives; but one day she let Elsie know that Gilbert Neale was the lover who had given her up, and in a few words told what the history of their love had been. How it had begun on his side, when he, the cleverest of the Neale family, had asked to share her studies with her father during one of their long autumn visits to Thoresby; and how in her heart it had grown gradually year by year, as the work for her father, to which she had devoted herself, approached completion, and she felt at liberty to turn her thoughts to other interests and hopes. Then, when she was happiest, the blow fell that divided them for ever. Gilbert Neale's love for his brother had proved stronger than his attachment to Margaret; from the moment of his brother's death he had withdrawn from all intercourse with the Le Fevre family, and taken an active part in the investigations that had led to Herbert Le Fevre's conviction and long punishment. "It was right," Margaret said gravely; "right. Better for your father himself that his guilt should be brought to light and that he should have to bear its punishment—far better and safer for him, than if he had been permitted to escape. But oh, how thankful I have been that it was not my husband who had to appear against my brother! Gilbert would have been my husband then, if my determination not to leave my father till his work was finished had not delayed our marriage. As it is, I have been permitted to bear the sorrow and the shame alone. I have not handed it down to any child of mine, or brought it on kindred who would have grudged the bearing it with me."

Elsie had no answer to make to such words as these. She could not acquiesce, as Margaret hoped she would; she could only turn away her head to hide the blinding tears that sprang into her eyes. She felt that if she had been Margaret she should not have been thankful for the resolution that had prevented the marriage taking place while it had been possible. It would have been the bitterest part of her regret that the delay had been her own doing. For her part, she had rather have had her lover bound to her for ever before the blow came, and trusted to the strength of her own devotion not to let it divide them then. She would have borne the suffering so bravely with him; she would have clung to him so closely, if only the right had been hers; she would have defied sorrow or shame to thrust them apart, if once they had belonged to each other.

About a week after Mrs. Blake's funeral, Margaret put into

Elsie's hand a letter from her grandmother, Mrs. Neale, containing a very cordial invitation for them all to come up to her house in London, and stay with her till some fresh place of abode could be fixed upon. Margaret had written to tell of their present discomfort at Oldbury, and to consult about taking lodgings for them in London; and this was her answer.

Elsie read the letter through in silence, and her face grew very pale. "Aunt Margaret—when?" was all she could say as she gave it back.

Margaret kissed her gently. "At once, I think, dearest," she said; "there is no use lingering over what is so painful to us all. We shall most probably go abroad in the spring, when your father comes to us; we shall not take another house in England. This furniture and our books had better be sold here. Crawford will stay for a few days after us to attend to all the necessary arrangements, but we had better go. You know it would be torture to your grandfather to see anything of the kind going on. We must take him away with as little bustle of preparation as possible. We shall all feel better when we have left Oldbury. The curiosity about us, and the ill-will that gossiping tongues have aroused, are so strong just now that we can have neither privacy nor peace here. You see, dear, even Miss Berry, the kindest creature in the world, keeps away from us now, while other people are rude and intrusive."

"It is our own fault," said Elsie, a little bitterly. "We have kept every one away from us; we have never given our neighbours a chance of knowing or loving us. No wonder they are easily turned against us."

"We have done what we believed to be our duty," Margaret answered. "When we first came here, your grandfather and grandmother and I agreed that we could not allow our new neighbours, who were ignorant of our true position, to be drawn into intimacies with us. As years passed on I began to dread for you the very trial that, in spite of my precautions, has come. We shall all be happier away from Oldbury now, dear."

During the busy days that followed, Elsie hardly realized what was coming. She had a bewildered desire to stop the minutes from carrying her onwards; but Margaret kept her employed. The hours slipped by, and very quickly the last afternoon that they were to spend in Oldbury came.

Margaret told Elsie that she would walk down the town with her to call at Miss Berry's house and wish her good-bye, and then visit the churchyard once more, and take a last look at the

grave they were leaving there. Elsie longed to say she should prefer to go alone, but she had learned to be more considerate of Margaret's feelings now, and she would not hurt her by seeming indifferent to her sympathy.

The necessary preparations for the morrow could not be quickly got through, and it was getting late; the autumn evening was beginning to close in when Margaret and Elsie set out on their walk.

It was a still November day, with a tender grey sky overhead, and all the fields and meadows beneath stretching out wide and bare to the misty purple hills in the horizon. Little lights began to start up here and there as they approached the town. Elsie remembered the delight and wonder with which she used to watch them when she was a child. Oldbury, with its irregularly-built sloping streets, was a pretty town to walk through in the twilight. Cecil had once said it was like some foreign town; and immediately Elsie's thoughts were busy calling up the occasion and the time when the remark had been made, making out where they had all stood,—she, and Cecil, and Stephen Pierrepont,—and the look that had come on his face when he had refused to allow any town the honour of being compared to Oldbury, and when Cecil had rallied him on his sudden enthusiasm for his native place.

Meanwhile they had reached Miss Berry's house. The door was opened for them by Miss Berry's servant Caroline, in one of her most gracious moods.

Her mistress was out. She had gone to spend the afternoon with Mrs. Adams, who was ill; but would they not step in and wait till she came home?

Margaret hesitated, but Elsie passed before her into the little sitting-room. At all events she would wish that good-bye. It looked the same, just the same as when she had spent such happy hours there. Her own little book-case, with the German books carefully dusted, and looking bright as if they were in constant use still; the lamp, Miss Berry's work-basket, with what looked like the very same piece of knitting in it that Elsie knew so well. Elsie went up to each of these objects, and touched them in turn. "Ah, good-bye, good-bye!" Her hands lingered on them, and clung to the senseless things as if she could not bring her wasted farewells to an end.

Then she turned to the window-seat where she had sat and cried about nothing one foolish afternoon. She looked across towards the Rectory; it had a more wide-awake aspect than

usual. Some slight bustle of preparation was going on there. A window in the upper story stood wide open, and a maid-servant was putting up fresh curtains in the room. Life was going on there. He was coming home again, now that she was going away. Margaret's eye had perhaps fallen on the same tokens too, for she began to be anxious to leave the house.

"I am afraid we must not wait longer," she said; "Grand-papa will be uneasy about us if we are not home before it is quite dark. There are writing materials on the table; I will write a line of farewell to Miss Berry, and of thanks for all her kindness."

"Oh no, no, let me write!" cried Elsie. She took the paper and pen from Margaret's hand; but when she tried to write, no words at all answering to the passion of grief in her heart would come to her.

"Good-bye, dear friend! Good-bye," she wrote, while the tears swelled in her eyes. "We are going away from Oldbury; we shall never see you again; good-bye, good-bye! Think of me sometimes. Talk a little about me to Oldbury people; don't let every one think ill of us, or forget us quite. I shall never love any place like Oldbury—never be happy anywhere else. Good-bye for ever from Elsie!"

As she finished writing, the flood-gates of long suppressed grief broke forth, and a storm of tears fell down and blistered the paper. Margaret let her weep unrestrainedly for a while, and then came to her and raised her head, which she had bent down on the table, and put away her wet hair from her face.

"We have another sad visit to pay, dearest. I am sure you will wish to leave sufficient time for that," she said gravely; and Elsie was awed into quietness and self-command again.

They had some distance to walk before they reached the entrance to that part of the churchyard where Mrs. Blake's grave lay; but the moon had risen, and, looking down dim and watery through the thin clouds, showed them the path to the newly turfed hillock. They stood side by side, looking at it in silence. Elsie did not weep here. She had shed all her tears, and she had a twinge of remorse for feeling now so stupid and dead, as if nothing could ever be of much moment to her again. She stood as in a dream, staring blankly down at the squares of half-dead turf lightly laid over the mound. The minutest particulars of the scene were stamping themselves on her mind, to be recalled with tender yearning hereafter; but now she seemed to herself to be stupidly unconscious of what it was that

lay at her feet. Margaret was far the most deeply moved. This was parting from Oldbury, to her, and it was a very bitter parting. She was leaving behind all that remained to her of the one tender friend and confidant who had been with her in all her sorrows, and whose sympathy had never failed. She knelt down by the grave for a few moments, and covered her face with her hands, then hastily gathered a few blades of the half-dead grass and put them in her glove.

"Come away," she said when she rose from her knees; "we are not leaving her behind. This is not she—it is only the precious outward form that will be kept safely and given back to us one day. In whatever distant place we lie down to sleep, we shall meet and find each other out then. Let us go. She would not have had us neglect one of the smallest of our duties to mourn by her grave."

They left the churchyard by a side gate which opened on one of the narrow streets leading to the river. Groups of idle men and boys were standing about, and as Margaret and Elsie passed among them they were annoyed and frightened by hearing their names spoken derisively, and by one or two of the roughest lads pressing forwards to stare at them and jostle them in the path-way. Margaret drew Elsie's hand under her arm.

"We ought not to have stayed out so late; but never mind," she said encouragingly, "we shall soon be in the better-lighted streets. Don't let them see that you are frightened."

"There is some one following us," said Elsie nervously, after a minute or two.

"Don't look back," said Margaret; "we shall be in the High Street soon."

But the quick steps—a man's footsteps—gained on them, and there was something in their ring that made Elsie's heart beat quickly; then a tall figure stepped into sight, and a familiar voice addressed them. The wild flicker of hope went out, and left Elsie to discover how very sick and faint the fright and the disappointment had made her. The moonlight showed plainly the elder Mr. Pierrepont politely lifting his hat and addressing Margaret.

"You must allow me to walk by your side till you get home," he said; "there are ill-disposed people about, and it is late for you to walk in this part of the town unprotected."

Margaret replied with a brief but courteous "thank you;" and when Mr. Pierrepont went round to Elsie's side and insisted on her accepting the support of his arm, she added a few

more words of gratitude for his opportune interference on their behalf. She saw that Elsie was trembling so as to be quite unable to stand alone, and she felt really thankful to be relieved from the uncomfortable situation they were in.

Mr. Pierrepont felt how the small fingers shook that Elsie placed on his arm, and a sudden rush of kind protecting fatherly feeling came over him towards this timid girl whom his son loved. He put his hand over the fluttering fingers, and said encouragingly :

"Don't be alarmed, I will take care of you till you get home."

Elsie looked up into his face, and a sudden resolution came to her too. She was close to the man who held her fate in his hands—her fate, her life. She could not plead for herself with him—no, not for a thousand lives—but she could not be altogether passive; she must let him know that this was probably the last time in all their lives that they should ever walk side by side, and have a chance of exchanging words with each other—they two, who had surely one strong feeling of their hearts in common.

"This is to be our last evening in Oldbury," she said : "we are going quite away to-morrow, never to come back again. We have been paying a farewell visit to the churchyard."

Margaret in Elsie's place would rather have died than have spoken such words in such a sad little pleading voice, with such a look, appealing against the woe of leaving Oldbury, as that which came from under Elsie's tear-wet eyelashes. She could not have spoken so herself, and her heart beat quickly and proudly as she watched the effect Elsie's words had on Mr. Pierrepont.

He started, and there was a visible change of countenance. "Indeed !" he said in a tone of surprise—pleased surprise Margaret thought it was. "I had no idea of this. So soon ; are we losing you so soon ? I had not heard anything about your going."

"No," Margaret answered ; "it has been rather a sudden resolution. Various circumstances have occurred which would make a longer residence in Oldbury painful to us."

There was a pause of some minutes, and then Mr. Pierrepont, turning away his eyes from Elsie, said slowly :

"I am sorry, very sorry, that anything should have occurred to distress you in Oldbury ; but I confess I think you are acting wisely—and permit me to say, under all the circumstances, honourably—in choosing another residence."

They had turned into the brightly lighted High Street, and Margaret could see Mr. Pierrepont's face quite plainly. She scanned it as closely as she had done on a former occasion, and came to a somewhat similar conclusion from what she read there. For Elsie's sake she was anxious to know exactly how he was disposed towards them, and as she finished her study of his countenance she felt that she did know. He was sorry for them, very sorry. She no longer believed that it was he who had betrayed their secret. He would not willingly injure them; he could not bear to see them insulted; only he had rather not see or hear anything about them. He wanted them to take away the burden of their dangers and their disgrace from contact with him and his. He had no impulse moving him to help them to bear it. Let them make haste to pass out of his life, and give him and his son leave to forget them, and all the pain they had caused. Any slight hope for Elsie that Margaret had entertained passed utterly out of her mind as she turned her head away. She felt thankful she had acted with promptitude, and by taking her niece away from Oldbury saved her from the slights and humiliations and weary alternations between hope and despair to which she would certainly have been exposed if she had been tempted to enter into a private engagement with Stephen, which must have depended more or less on Mr. Pierrepont's will for its fulfilment. Any present pain Margaret decided was better for her than such a position as that.

Occupied with these thoughts, Margaret walked up the hill in silence. When they came within sight of their house, she paused.

"We need not trouble you to go farther out of your way," she said; "we are quite safe here, within sight of our own garden."

"Nay," said Mr. Pierrepont, "let me walk with you up to the house door."

There was a little flurry and agitation in his voice as he spoke. He was debating with himself, battling with himself, whether or not he should say some words he wished, yet dreaded to utter. He was afraid of being whirled on, in the impulse of speaking, to commit himself in a way he knew he should regret all his life afterwards; and yet conscience, and the recollection that he should meet his son that evening, forbade him to remain altogether silent.

Margaret held out her hand when they had reached the door-step to bid him good-bye.

He held it a second longer than necessary.

"You saw Mrs. Lutridge one day after she had been with me?" he asked hesitatingly.

"Yes," answered Margaret quickly. A warm flush rose to her cheek at the recollection of the interview, but she had no wish to be drawn into an expression of her opinion respecting the impropriety of Mrs. Lutridge's interference in their affairs just then.

Mr. Pierrepont was baffled, but he made one effort more.

"You are really going to-morrow? Have you, either of you, any message you would wish me to give to any friend who may be surprised and pained to hear of your sudden departure?"

He was still holding Margaret's hand, but he looked at Elsie. Oh! if any word would come to her to say, any little word! But with Margaret's eyes and Mr. Pierrepont's fixed on her face, how could she speak? Her lips clove together. A great sob rose in her throat. If she uttered anything, she felt it would be a bitter inarticulate cry from the pain she was in.

Margaret waited a minute, and then answered:

"We have no message, but our best wishes for the future well-doing of all who are interested in us. We should be sorry to think that any recollections of us should cloud their happiness, or interfere with their prospects in life in any way.

"Miss Blake, I have no words to say how much I honour and thank you," Mr. Pierrepont exclaimed, warmly wringing her hand.

"Farewell," Margaret answered, resolutely releasing her fingers from his grasp, and turning away towards the door, not so quickly, however, but that he had time to catch something of the same well-remembered look and smile that had wounded him so deeply once before.

As he walked back down the hill he had again a perception of having been weighed in a balance and found wanting; but this time it did not make him merely angry or indignant. A deeper feeling had been roused; a sense of inferiority, of weakness, of dissatisfaction with his own character, came over him. He seemed to perceive that a higher good than he had had worthiness to seize had come near him, and that he had placed himself definitely on a lower level of endeavour by having turned away from it.

He was by no means a stranger to self-examination. He constantly felt real repentance for daily misdeeds ; but the glimpse of his true self which came to him through a perception of Margaret's nobleness brought a deeper humiliation and more wholesome sorrow than any he had hitherto experienced.

The Blakes left Oldbury early the next morning. Margaret drew down her veil, and would not trust herself to look out as they drove from their house to the railway station at the bottom of the town. But Elsie sat close to the carriage-window, and devoured with her eyes each well known beloved object as they passed ; the shop men and women arranging their goods at their open doors ; the charity school children in their frightful uniform of Mrs. Lutridge's invention, walking in procession up the hill ; the daws flying round the old church tower ; the country people coming into the town over the bridge with their market-baskets on their heads. Happy people who were staying behind, and might any day see the face she should never see again ! Happy birds that might fly near him ! Happy streets where his steps would be, and hers never, never again !

Suddenly a vivid colour flew into Elsie's face ; she made a little movement, as if she would rise from her seat and put her head from the window, then checked herself, and sank into the farthest corner of the carriage, whiter than she had been crimson a minute before. She had seen him. They had passed Stephen Pierrepont walking quickly up the street, with his eyes fixed on the ground. He had not seen them, at least Elsie thought not. Just at the last moment, when they had passed him, she fancied he raised his head ; but it was too late, she should never know whether he caught a last partial glimpse of her or not ; never be able to satisfy herself about what sort of look would have come on his face if he had turned his head sooner and discovered who was near.

Yet she was glad it had happened ; glad to know he was in Oldbury again, though she was leaving the place. She could not feel quite cut off from him while he was surrounded by objects on which her eyes had rested so lately, to which she had just breathed such passionate farewells, which must surely give out some thoughts of her to him.

The train was starting when they reached the station. Elsie and Mr. Blake took their seats in the carriage at once, while Margaret went for their tickets and saw the luggage labelled. It seemed a pandemonium of confusion and noise and horror to

Elsie, who had had no previous experience of railway stations; and she had to control her own grief to speak soothingly to her grandfather, who was disturbed at not being able to help Margaret, and nervous at the bare possibility of her being left behind. At last Margaret came back and got into the carriage, and the train began to move. Elsie put her head out of the window for a last look; a cloud of escaped steam intercepted her view, and when it cleared away the scene was changed; the station was a red brick building, dwindling second by second into a mere speck. They were away among green fields, with cattle instead of people staring into the carriages. Oldbury was a town of toy houses climbing a miniature hill, then they lost sight of it altogether. Elsie sat back and drew her veil over her face. The parting was over, and for the next three or four hours, while Mr. Blake slept in his seat, and Margaret seemed to occupy herself with a book she had brought with her, she was free to live all its minutes over and over again in thought, and sound the depth of the river of pain she had waded through.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A CONTRAST.

CECIL had returned to London, and was plunged at once into a whirl of excitement and business that contrasted strangely with the quiet she had left behind her at Oldbury. Her father had accepted the official appointment that had been offered to him, and was to sail for China in a few weeks. He had consented to take Cecil with him, and as his time was much taken up with public business, a great deal of the labour of preparation for the voyage fell on her. The mornings were spent in receiving directions from her father, or copying letters and memoranda for him; her afternoons in driving about to shops and warehouses; and the evenings had to be given up to receiving farewell visits from friends and relations, who had returned early to London that autumn in order to see something of Sir Cecil before he sailed. She had few opportunities of being alone with her father, and in the midst of all the bustle of occupation and society she felt strangely lonely, and cut off from all that had interested her during the past summer. Stephen Pierrepont left Eaton Square the day after she returned to go to Cambridge, and thence for a week to Oldbury. She longed for him to come back while he was away; but when he was again under the same roof with her, she found his presence did not make as much difference to her as she had expected. She saw hardly anything of him. Sir Cecil took it for granted that his nephew was to go abroad with them, and always spoke of it as a settled thing. Steenie professed not to have made up his mind, but he threw himself energetically into the whirlpool of business in which they were all involved directly he entered the house, and seemed as

unable to be drawn out of it for a few moments' quiet as Sir Cecil himself.

Cecil discovered one day, to her surprise, that she and her cousin had been a week in the house together, and yet she had never ventured to mention Elsie's name to him, or ask a single question about what he had seen and done while he was in Oldbury. Ventured was the right word to use, for she did feel afraid of beginning on the subject to him. He did not seem at all disposed to open his heart to her now. "He was very much altered," she thought; "grown quite silent and formidable; working hard all day, and filling up the odds and ends of time with tiresome, unnecessary labours, as if for the express purpose of never having a minute's leisure for rest and talk with her."

The incessant bustle of occupation he kept up fretted her dreadfully. She had longed for him to come back, but now she began to wish he had stayed away altogether. Nothing could be so bad as to have him going about the house with that cold, hard look on his face, pretending to be wholly engrossed in business, talking mechanically about every-day matters when he felt obliged to speak at all, and never letting fall a single word, even to her, of what she knew he was thinking about every minute.

"Certainly," Cecil thought, "men have most uncomfortable ways of being unhappy." Even her father could only show his sympathy by looking aggrieved, and making great haste to change the subject whenever any allusion to Elsie Blake, or to any of the incidents of her summer in Oldbury, came into their conversation. He *would* be more vexed that *she* should be troubled about her cousin's disappointment than concerned about the disappointment itself.

When he first kissed her on her return home, and gave one of his searching looks down into her eyes, Cecil shrank away from the scrutinizing glance just for a moment, and felt, with an indescribable pang, that for the first time in all her life she did not wish her father to read quite all that her face might possibly tell him; not all the restlessness and pain in her heart, that made her feel as if she could have no peace till her cousin's attachment to Elsie Blake was approved, and the engagement allowed to go on. Her father would misunderstand her, she feared, if he knew how very strongly she felt about it. Yet when after that one long look he never showed any disposition to discuss the subject of her cousin's engagement with her, she grew impatient and almost indignant, as if he had in some way

misjudged her. She longed to explain and plead and force him to see things exactly as she saw them, and to comprehend her feelings as she tried to explain them to herself.

Cecil had time to brood over such thoughts as these while she was being dressed for dinner one evening, when a large party of friends and relations were expected to a farewell entertainment at Sir Cecil's house. She sat passive in the hands of her maid, and her head drooped lower and lower as her thoughts went on, till she provoked an indignant remonstrance.

"Really, Miss, I shan't be able to make your hair fit to be seen if you won't hold your head steadier."

"Well, then, will that do?" said Cecil, stiffening her neck. "I wish you would be quick. Was it Papa who went into the drawing-room just now?"

"No, Miss, only Mr. Stephen. And, indeed, how am I to be quick when you move your head every minute and shake all the pins out as fast as I put them in, and don't seem to take any manner of interest in what I am doing to-night. Yet who knows whether this mayn't be the last evening party we shall ever dress for in our lives in a Christian land, Miss Cecil? Will you have the pearl necklace Sir Cecil gave you on your birthday, to wear with your pink silk dress, or the gold ornaments Mr. Stephen brought from Malta that you used to be so fond of?"

"I will wear Papa's necklace to-night. Make the best you can of me," said Cecil.

When the business of dressing was over, Cecil turned to the glass and rubbed her brown cheeks to bring a shade of colour into them.

"Yes, I shall do," she said; and a half smile passed over her face as she murmured to herself some lines from a poem of Browning's she had been reading:—

"Noon strikes—here sweeps the procession! our lady
borne smiling and smart,
With a pink gauze gown all spangles, and seven swords
stuck in her heart."

"That's how a good many people go to evening parties," she said. "Well, I'm ready for my part in the show."

It was early, and no one was in the drawing-room when she entered but her cousin Stephen, who was standing in one of the window recesses, staring stupidly out at nothing into the deserted square garden. She went up to him almost timidly.

"You are not going to dine with us then?" she said, observing that he was not dressed for dinner.

"Yes, of course I am; why not? What else should I be going to do?"

"You are not ready; that's all I meant."

"I am going upstairs this instant."

"I wish you would not go; I want so to talk to you a little while."

"Well."

He turned his face towards her, but the expression on it did not encourage her to proceed; tears sprang to her eyes instead, and she was silent. His countenance changed at the sight of her emotion; he turned back to the window for a moment, and then came close to her.

"I can't help it, Cecil," he said, in a shaky voice. "It's a shame, I know; but you must forgive me. After all your goodness and sympathy I ought to treat you with more confidence, but I can't talk to you now; I dare not. Some day you will know, perhaps, that there are feelings that won't bear talking about, even to one's kindest friends."

"I know that now," said Cecil quickly. "I don't want you to say a word more than you like—not about feelings; only there is so much I am longing to know that you could tell me. I have not heard a word from Oldbury since I left, but just what comes in my uncle's letters, and you have been there. Surely you must have heard something about the Blakes while you were at home."

"Nothing but what I have told you already. Mrs. Blake died the very day after I got home, as you know. I could not intrude myself on them against their will at such a time. I wandered about the shut-up house day after day, but I never got so much as a glimpse of a face at a window. Cecil, you can't imagine what torture that week was to me. The horrible talk about them on every one's lips that I was forced to hear, and the impossibility of contradicting it, so as to do any good, and then my father's imploring looks at me whenever I went out. He watched me all that week as if his very life depended on what I was going to do, yet never said a word. I could not stand it. I came back here to wait for a while, till it was possible to take some step."

"And Elsie has not taken any notice of your letter yet?"

"No. I did speak to my father about that, and he assured me she had had it. It was difficult enough to question

him ; he is miserable, and takes refuge in ignoring the whole subject. There has never been overmuch confidence between us, unfortunately, and about this, I find, we cannot talk. I suppose it's natural. He has only been treating me as I have treated you this week. He takes it for granted that I am going abroad with your father, and seems to consider that his consent to what he imagines to be my wish, in the choice of my profession, ought to bind me to relinquish the——other project altogether,—as if that were the whim of a month, to be just dropped and forgotten."

"He had rather let you go abroad for years, than consent to your engagement with poor Elsie."

"Yes, that's it—rather I went away than stayed to be a discredit to him in Oldbury."

"Steenie, I don't think you ought to speak so of your father. I wish you would not get bitter about it."

"I am trying hard not to be bitter. It is the old notion that he is letting himself be guided by other people's opinions, and the stupid gossip of that prejudiced little place, rather than by his own best feelings and judgment, that makes it so difficult for me to speak openly to him. If we could talk quite freely together, we should perhaps find that on some points we don't differ so much. I foresee all the difficulties and the misery this terrible discovery opens out before us as vividly as he can."

"Do you mean, then, that you are willing to give her up?"

"No, indeed, I don't. She may very well give me up, though. To my mind that is the difficulty now ; my case is altered since I spoke to her first. What can I offer her? Nothing but a long waiting, and the prospect of being disowned by my family at last. That's not what I would bring to any one I loved. She may well shrink from such a prospect."

"But she will not shrink."

"Not if she were left to herself—I know that well enough ; but I know, too, she will not have strength to resist the influences that will be brought to bear on her. I saw her aunt, Miss Blake, on the morning after that terrible afternoon just before I left Oldbury, and we talked together for a few moments. She distrusts me, and is as much against us as my father can be."

"You could not make her believe that what she had told you the day before had not in the least changed——"

"No," interrupted Stephen ; "because it had changed, not my feelings towards Elsie, but the way in which I looked on our engagement. It was a terrible revelation. Any man who

cared for the honour of his family must have been stunned and broken down by having such a history disclosed to him. I could feel at the first moment that I could not endure to leave her to bear the burden of such a life as was before her alone ; but I could not see very clearly how my part of the bearing was to be done. My love for her has never wavered—how should it ?—but it does not blind me to the facts of the case.”

“No,” said Cecil rather bitterly, “men can’t make sacrifices without being thoroughly aware of what they are doing, and that is what women can’t understand.”

“I said nothing about sacrifices,” cried Stephen. “It is not a sacrifice, it is a necessity. I know I can’t do anything else than stick to her. I love her too much, even if my word were not pledged, and whatever evil comes on her must come on me too. I don’t make any pretence to generosity—not the least. If she had not been just what she is ; if the thought of her suffering alone had been less intolerable and monstrous to me ; if it had been anybody else——”

“Me, for instance,” said Cecil, perversely courting the pain of the answer she knew she should get. “Such a strong-minded, resolute personage as I am, you would have thought strong enough to be left to battle against misfortune alone.”

“It is impossible to imagine you in such a case. What is the use of putting it ?” said Steenie, with a puzzled look.

“No use at all,” Cecil hurried on ; “it was nonsense. But, Steenie, I don’t despair of your getting a letter from her yet. While her grandmother was dying she could not think of any one else, and it is only a fortnight since Mrs. Blake’s funeral now. She may really not have been well enough to write to you. It will be a difficult task to answer your letter whenever she does it. She cannot engage herself to you while your father refuses his sanction ; she can only promise to wait and trust you, and hope for better times.”

“I know we must wait even for an engagement. The question I want to have answered is whether I go with you or stay in England. Our end might be attained quickest by my going away ; and yet when I think of what may be before her—the changes, the need of protection she may have—I shrink from going. It would be something to be able to go down to Oldbury once or twice a year, and satisfy myself that she was safe there. Cecil, if you had seen her as I saw her last, all the life crushed out of her by that dreadful history she had overheard ; lying like a broken flower—and I had to leave her

so. They took possession of her, and would not let me stay to speak a word of comfort. Yet there is no one in the world cares for her but me ; no one. I will never give her up !”

“ But her aunt is a good woman ? ”

“ Yes, indeed, good enough I should say to redeem a whole family, whatever stain there might be on it, but she is capable of torturing my poor little darling to death. She will persuade her that it is her duty to give me up. She will work her into a frantic spirit of self-sacrifice. I shall be away, and the contrary influence will be brought to bear on her day after day. Her tender conscience will be tortured. I must see her, must have some sort of promise before I go. If there is no letter to-night, I have made up my mind to go down to Oldbury, and not leave this time till I have seen her, and had a thorough explanation with my father.”

“ And when you come back, you will know whether you sail with us or not. Papa will be terribly disappointed if you fail him at the last.”

“ Will he ? It has occurred to me during the last few days that he was less anxious about my going. I have fancied once or twice that he had repented of having offered the private secretaryship to me.”

“ That’s impossible, quite impossible ! ” cried Cecil vehemently. “ You must not get such absurd notions into your head.”

There was a pause, during which a very painful conjecture passed through Cecil’s mind.

“ How miserable it is to be in suspense ! ” she broke out impatiently. “ Oh, how I wish something were settled ! How long will you be in Oldbury ? ”

“ You may be sure I don’t like the suspense any better than you do ; I am anxious enough to end it,” Stephen said.

“ How different things are from one’s fancies of them,” Cecil observed mournfully. “ When we used to wonder about the seclusion in which the Blakes lived, those first weeks when you and I talked about them so much in Oldbury, how little we thought——”

“ Hush, don’t go on,” cried Stephen, turning quickly away from her to the window with a look of suffering in his face that made Cecil miserable.

Nothing pained him so much now as allusions to those gay-hearted, playful confidences ; while, on the contrary, Cecil’s thoughts were always flying back for relief to the thoughtless days when she had more or less shared her companion’s feelings

without exactly knowing to what result the excitement in which they were living was carrying them.

She was still longing to be able to say something to atone for the pain she had unconsciously given, when Steenie started from the window and crossed the room in two strides.

"Ah, the eight o'clock postman," Cecil said to herself as the well known knock came. "He has rushed down to get the letters. We do have Oldbury letters at this time of day sometimes. That was what he was watching for when I came in. He is always looking out for her letter. I understand now how it is that the postman's knock always seems to go through him, and why he looks at every bundle of letters that comes in with such a dreadful hungry look. She might have answered before now—a whole month! However many terrible things had happened to me, if I had lost a hundred grandmothers, I would not have inflicted such a torture of suspense on any one—not on my greatest enemy. Suspense is torture; will he have the charity to think of mine? He is so long, he must be reading a letter on the stairs; will he come back and tell me about it? I daresay not."

Stephen did, however, reappear at the drawing-room door for an instant.

"Only a letter from my father," he said, showing some closely written sheets which he had almost torn across in his eagerness to unfold them. "Only a long letter from my father with nothing whatever in it; that's all."

"Nothing whatever! that means only everything but *the* thing he cares about," Cecil said to herself as she retreated to the window. "I daresay the letter is full of anxious advice and affection. Well I must say it's a little hard on fathers and mothers and friends to have everything they say turned into nothing, unless it bears on the one absorbing interest that has crushed them out,—to have always to sympathize with that, or else be nothing."

A dark wet spot on the sheeny silk dress caught Cecil's eye and startled her; she passed her hands hastily over her eyes.

"Oh, what a goose I am! I must stop thinking. There is a double knock at the door. Well, I'm ready for them.

'Smiling and smart,
With a pink gauze gown all spangles, and seven swords stuck in her heart.'

I daresay I shan't be the only one in such a case to-night."

The evening passed off brilliantly, thanks to Cecil's exertions. Sir Cecil came back to the drawing-room, after taking the last

party of guests to their carriage, to express his content and to look after her. She was still standing on the hearth-rug where he had left her, gazing wearily at the flower vases in the grate. He put his arm round her, and stroked back her hair, looking down into her face. "Are you very tired, my darling?"

"Oh no, Papa," Cecil answered briskly; "not yet. I have not nearly done my day's work yet. Mrs. Cameron has been advising me about our outfit for the voyage from her own experience, and I mean to write out a list of all the things she tells me I ought to order before I go to bed."

"What busy, capable brains there must be under this silky stuff and these foolish ribbons!" said Sir Cecil, playing with her hair. "What a brave little soul it is altogether, getting through as much business as a Secretary of State in the day-time, and talking like—who shall I say?—not Madame de Staël exactly, but the next chatteringest Frenchwoman, half the night."

"I suppose I inherit some of the 'fretful activity'—was not that the word?—which, in commenting on his appointment, the *Times* this morning attributes to Sir Cecil Russell, and which it fears will make him such a dangerous envoy for her Majesty to send to the far East."

"I may well be active in public business, when all management of my private concerns is taken out of my hands by my mite of a daughter. Stephen deserted us shamefully to-night—coming in in the middle of dinner, and sneaking away at the first opportunity."

"Papa," said Cecil, suddenly lifting up her head, "I used to think you the kindest and most just person in the world."

"Well, and now?" Sir Cecil asked, smiling.

Cecil drew a low easy chair forward, pushed her father down into it, and perched herself on his knee.

"We are going to talk it out, Papa. I'm not quite satisfied with you."

"Are you not? That's serious, and hard too, just when I am so well satisfied with you, and have consented, against the advice of all our prudent relations and friends, to drag you half over the world after me."

"Papa, please, don't lead away from what I want to talk about. It is so unlike you to be thinking so much of your own concerns, even at the busiest of times, that you can't acknowledge another person's unhappiness."

"I did not know I was in that amiable frame of mind at present."

"You are ; you will make light of this trouble of Stephen's. You don't seem to think it a real serious misfortune."

"I think a very serious misfortune may be made out of it," Sir Cecil answered gravely. "My darling, it is hardly likely at our different ages, and with your utter lack of experience in life, that we should not take different views of such a matter. Can't you trust me without quite understanding what I am doing?"

"Oh yes ! yes ! If I were sure you were taking it seriously—if I thought you felt——"

"You feel too much," interrupted Sir Cecil. "Young people naturally exaggerate the importance of disappointments of this nature. They *may* be very much, I acknowledge ; they *may* colour a whole life, or they *may* be of very little consequence indeed after a month or two. Steenie is young. He has never as yet had trouble of any kind to test his character. I don't suppose he has more stability than other people. To encourage him to rush into an engagement so thoroughly undesirable in every way, would, I think, be a great mistake. He may be very much in love—I daresay he is ; but so much less capable is he of estimating the gravity of the circumstances of the case. I have no doubt the disappointment will seem very severe for a time, but it won't do him any harm, you need not be afraid. I think well enough of his character to believe that he will come out all the stronger for it."

"Papa, that is how I don't like to hear you talk," cried Cecil. "Oh, forgive me for saying it, but that is what I call unjust. You think of Steenie's character, and of how he is to get over it, but you quite forget her. You forget he has made her love him, and won her promise. You don't ask what effect it would have on her, to be cast off just because the person she loves does not think her worth braving trouble, and perhaps some loss of position and regard in the eyes of the world for. You may say what you like about Stephen's character coming out stronger for the disappointment, but I think the strength he would gain by turning away from a girl he loves, because she is unfortunate without fault of her own, would only be strength to do cruel and cowardly things. That's the sort of strength people get by trampling out love for worldly reasons. I had rather, caring as much for Steenie as you know I do, that he brought trouble on his life, and had to suffer even a great deal, than that he did what I should have to despise him for."

Sir Cecil looked up surprised into his daughter's face, and

then mused for some time silently. "There is a great deal in what you say," he resumed at last; "but you are only looking at one side. Stephen has duties to other people as well as to this girl. He is an only son, and he owes a great deal to his family and to his name. It does not belong to him alone. His father and his friends may well object to his connecting it with one so terribly disgraced. There is an inheritance of shame, as well as of honour; a thoughtful man ought to shrink from entering into it. Then as to your friend, the young lady herself, I don't forget her so completely as you suppose; even for her, I am of opinion that the present pain is the least evil. Youth is not all of life, remember. There is a long, long time to come after its vehement passions are over. And I doubt whether any early disappointment could entail such long suffering as would come upon a woman who felt that she had brought discord into her husband's family, and injured his prospects in life, when once she perceived that he had begun to regret the sacrifices he had made for her sake. Can't you believe that it might be better for your friend to bear her trial alone, than to see the shadow of her father's guilt fall on those she loves best?"

"I think I might feel so, but Elsie Blake—it is cruel to think of her having to suffer alone. If you had seen her, you would understand. Think what her life will be. It would be easy for me to bear to have any hope I clung to snatched away, because whatever were to happen to me, I should always have had you; but all her life she has had worse than no father. I feel she ought to have some one;—there is nothing I would not do to give her some one to help her and love her, when I think of that."

Cecil knew her father did not like the sight of tears, and she paused and struggled hard to send back the moisture that all but overflowed her eyes. Sir Cecil hastily drew his hand across his own.

"You are an eloquent pleader; but how you are trembling, my poor little one. I think we have had as much of this talk as is good for us. I do not see that there is anything for me to do; I can't recall the advice I have given, and Steenie must not marry without his father's consent."

"No; but if you approved—my uncle is so easily persuaded by you—he might consent to their being married even now; and if they were to leave England directly with us, all the discomfort of Oldbury censure and gossip would be avoided. When we all came back again, Elsie would have been his wife so long, everything else would be forgotten."

"I don't think so ; and I am not prepared to take such a responsibility on myself. I could not think of interfering to bring about this marriage, and, besides, I should require to know a girl very thoroughly, and think well of her family too, before I consented to bring her into such close intimacy with you as the plan you propose would necessitate."

"Papa, listen," said Cecil, suddenly throwing her arms round his neck ; "I will tell you what I would do rather than be a hindrance to their happiness—I would give you up to her. Yes, she is so good and beautiful and gentle, you would get to love her like a daughter very soon, and she would wait on you almost as well as I could. She shall go with you and Stephen, and I will stay here in this house with Grandmamma all the years you are away, and wait for you to come back again. I would be very patient ; I would listen to all the stories——"

"Yes, I daresay. And how much of you should I find when I came back again after such a course of discipline, my poor little self-elected Iphigenia ? No, no, I'm not disposed to be sacrificed on this fine altar of friendship, if you are. I won't have an unknown tall daughter thrust upon me instead of my own little one, to whose absurdities I am, at all events, accustomed. It's an impracticable scheme, Cecil ; but after all, if your friend is worth as much as you think, and if Stephen's attachment to her has sufficient stability in it, their case is not altogether desperate. They can be faithful to each other without vows. Let Steenie come out to China with us ; it is the best thing he can do for himself every way. When we all return, six or seven years hence, he will find Oldbury looking very much as it does now. In that sleepy, comfortable place six years or so won't have made much difference in any one. If he chooses then to go up to that gloomy little house on the hill to look for a wife, and finds Miss Elsie Blake waiting for him, their attachment would have a different sort of look about it, and might deserve greater consideration than it gets now. No one then would have a right to interfere."

"May I tell him you say so ?" asked Cecil.

"I had rather you said nothing about it. He would turn it into greater encouragement than it is meant for ; and unless his attachment can survive all manner of discouragement, it had much better die. Now don't think any more to-night. Go to bed, and come down without those black rings round your eyes to-morrow."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

MISS BERRY'S PROMISE.

CECIL calculated on her cousin's remaining at least a week in Oldbury, and was somewhat disappointed when, on the fourth morning of his absence, her father received a letter from Mr. Pierrepont announcing his intention of coming up to London that day with his son, and remaining in Eaton Square till the time fixed for their departure from England arrived. Cecil got up and looked at the note over her father's shoulder.

"It appears to be quite settled then," she observed, "that Steenie is to sail with us."

"Yes; I always knew he would," answered Sir Cecil quietly.

There was something in the tone of the remark that rather disconcerted Cecil. It sounded like, "I always knew he would not forego so manifest an advantage for any romantic folly." She could not give her mind to her business quite as well as usual that morning. She wandered vaguely about the house longing for Steenie to appear, that she might hear his own justification of his decision.

He and his father did not arrive till late in the afternoon, and Cecil had to give her undivided attention to her uncle for the first hour, while he sat with her in the drawing-room before dinner, talking over the arrangements for the voyage, and getting from her many little particulars about their plans, which his son seemed to have forgotten to communicate.

While Cecil answered his questions, and stole a studying glance every now and then into Steenie's grave face, she came to the conclusion that she should probably have to do without the explanation of her cousin's change of purpose she had been looking for all day.

Some words her father had said to her had seemed, when she came to think them over, like warnings not to take too much on herself; and she had made up her mind to be prudent, and not put herself in the way of saying more than she ought.

It was a relief, however, when, as she was following her uncle from the drawing-room, Steenie called her back.

"Can't you spare me five minutes?"

"You know I can."

"Well, it is all over; they have left Oldbury."

"Left Oldbury! But where have they gone?"

"That is what no one seems to know. Yet even that is not the worst. My father saw them the evening before they left—Miss Blake and Elsie. He was kinder to me than I should have expected; he asked for a message for me. She was there; she might surely have sent some word—some acknowledgment of my letter."

"And she did not?"

"No; Miss Blake, in her presence, gave a message; something about hoping that no recollections of them would interfere with my future happiness. I cannot tell what it meant. My letter deserved a different acknowledgment from that. She should not have let that be said to me for answer to what I had written to her."

"Then you think there will never be any other answer?"

"If my father had not met them by chance, I should not have heard so much as this. They took leave of no one. They seem to have designed to vanish from the place without leaving a trace. If he had not seen them, I should have gone up to the house to find it empty. Not a word—and I have been waiting patiently to know her wishes all this time!"

"Did she know you were leaving England immediately?"

"I had told her it was for her to decide, and that, whether I went or stayed, all I did would still be for her. Well, it is clear they won't trust me. The long uncertainty would, I suppose, have been worse to her than giving it up altogether. Unhappy and forlorn as they are, the miserable pretence of support I offered was not worth accepting."

"I think she would have written to you if she dared. You don't blame her?"

"No, only for letting herself be overruled, and not giving me a chance of seeing her again. I ought to have had that, or some word from her. To have her slide away from me in this silent fashion is the hardest of all ways of losing her. But there,

Cecil, I have told you all there is to tell. Now it is over, we won't speak about it again. You must not think me ungrateful for all your sympathy because I can't talk."

"No, of course not. I shall think of *her* all the same, even if I never speak her name again."

"Thank you; God bless you for that! You are the kindest best sympathizer a man ever had."

Steenie stooped down and kissed her forehead as he finished speaking, and Cecil turned away and ran out of the room.

Was it all over then? Would Elsie's name never be mentioned between them again, and all that happy Oldbury summer become indeed a recollection to be struggled against and blotted out?

There was very little time for talk of any kind, during the busy bewildering days that followed. Stephen worked harder than any one, and the few hours he had to spare were given to his father. Lady Selina claimed a good deal of Cecil's attention; and as the day that was to separate her from her grandmother drew near, she discovered that even the old stories about the Russels being so small and brown had a sort of charm about them, as savouring of old home ties, that made the prospect of coming definitely to the last time of hearing more painful than she had anticipated.

She did not get as much sympathy from her father and Steenie in her regret at parting from all the inanimate objects of the old home as she would have liked. Sir Cecil had been too great a traveller to have very keen local attachments; and when she called on Stephen to join in mournful recollections of "that first time when we managed to drag the big illustrated Shakespeare from the book-shelf," or "the day when we painted our first picture on the rosewood easel," she generally met a pre-occupied look, or was put off with a hasty answer that checked her communications. These were not the recollections he was clinging to, she perceived. Something else was absorbing all his regrets. She must be content to take her farewell of the old life alone.

Just at the last, however, in the supreme moment of parting from the old scenes, she and her cousin had one more conversation, in which Elsie's name was once more freely spoken between them.

Stephen was absent the whole of the last day they were to be in London; and when he returned very late at night, Cecil happened to be the only member of the family still up. The

others had gone to bed thoroughly overcome with fatigue, and she had been making the most of the solitary hours, first to make up parcels of her own old childish treasures to leave behind for some poor children she was interested in, and then to write a long farewell epistle to Miss Berry.

Stephen entered the drawing-room as she was folding her letter. He had a nosegay of scented geranium leaves and balsam flowers in his hand, which he came and gave to her.

"I am glad you are up still," he said; "I promised to give you these flowers. You know where they come from, don't you?"

"Miss Berry's window-sill! Yes, yes; how well I know exactly where the flower-pots stand! I knew all day where you were, but your father has been quite in a state of mind about you, half fearing that you had disappeared mysteriously, and would never be heard of more."

• "You knew I was not so easily got rid of."

"I knew you would go to see the old place again."

"Don't let me interrupt your letter. Is it not very late for you to be sitting up?"

"I had finished. I have been writing to Miss Berry, and now I will put in a postscript to thank her for the flowers."

And Cecil lingered longer than necessary over her last sentence, feeling quite sure that her cousin would soon tell her more.

"It was not the old place I saw, Cecil," he said, after a few moments' silence. "I am glad I went and found that out. I shall go away freer, and be in less danger of being seized with a frantic *mal de pays*, such as dragged me back to Oldbury last spring. You have no notion how empty and meaningless it all looked to-day—a mere dead shell. What do I care for it? She was the whole place to me. I know that now, and I believe it has been so for years. I shall have no painful longings to get back to Oldbury for the future. That is all over since I have seen it again."

"Poor Oldbury!" said Cecil, rather bitterly. "Did you see any one besides Miss Berry?"

"I walked about the whole day, and went everywhere—up into the hills, and to all our old haunts by the river, feeling all the time as one might feel in walking about a churchyard. When it began to grow dark I turned into Miss Berry's house, and stayed till I had to run off to catch the last train. We had a good deal of talk. She thawed out of the strange frightened silence she has kept up with us lately, and spoke of the Blakes.

Cecil, you deserve to see it, you care so much for her—there, read,—it is a note from her to Miss Berry, that I made poor Elderberry give up to me just as I was going away.”

He opened the tear-blistered sheet on which Elsie had scrawled her good-bye, and held it before Cecil's eyes, but he would not let it out of his hand while she read.

Cecil's face was wet with tears, and it was some minutes before she could speak when she had come to the end of the blotted page.

“It is enough to break one's heart,” she said.

“It has comforted mine,” Steenie answered. “It is a ~~part~~ of herself. Every word of the note is like her. Poor child! how she suffered when she wrote it. See the blots on the paper! It shows what I think of your love for her, Cecil, that I let you look at them. Her silence, and what I chose to think her hardness towards me, had confused my thoughts of her, and now I have found her again. It is not her own will that has divided us, and nothing else shall. I don't leave England altogether so hopeless as I thought I should yesterday. Miss Berry has promised to follow up any opening for communication with her that may arise, and she will let me hear of her. Imagine having to depend for news of what one cares most about in the world on such letters as poor dear Elderberry's are sure to be. Yet even for that prospect of hearing of her I am immensely thankful.”

“I have been writing to Miss Berry to-night to explain how she is to communicate with us. She is sure to hear some news of the Blakes before long; and I have a strong presentiment that her rambling letters will prove the most interesting we shall receive from England—the ones we shall look out for most eagerly. There—that is my last letter written on the dear old Davenport Papa gave me when I was ten years old.”

“Are you leaving your geraniums and balsams behind you?”

“No, I am dividing them to give you half. I wonder who will keep their share the longest?”

“I shall, of course! Not that I understand your love of relics, or that I shall ever want anything to recall Elderberry's little old room, the most home-like place I have ever known in my life. It can't be anything to you in comparison.”

“Perhaps not. I hear Papa opening the door of his bedroom. He is wondering what keeps me up so very late; and indeed I ought to go, for our last English day is an hour old already.”

CHAPTER XXXIV.

WINTER RAIN.

MRS. NEALE lived in a tall, dark, old-fashioned house, in a quiet street opening on to one of the West-end squares; and Elsie's first view of her new abode, when she, her grandfather, and Margaret drove up to it on the afternoon of the day on which they had left Oldbury, was anything but a cheering one. It was a heavy sunless November afternoon. The West-end streets and squares had their dreariest deserted autumnal look. She glanced up and down long vistas of shut-up houses, all alike grim and lifeless looking, and remembered with a sort of remorse how, when she was a child, she used to envy Margaret her half-yearly journey to London. And this was what a journey was, and here where it ended.

The inside of Mrs. Neale's house was not more prepossessing than the outside. It had been a handsome abode in its day. The rooms were filled with what had once been costly furniture and ornaments, in the taste of a bygone time, which now had an indescribable air of neglect and decay about them.

Elsie was surprised to see Margaret wandering from room to room with a look of interest softening her face, such as had never come upon it for anything in Oldbury. Both to her and old Mr. Blake the scenes they had returned to were more congenial and home-like than those they had left. The ghost of Margaret's youth looked at her from the faded pictures and dust-laden, dreary decorations of the rooms; and objects in which Elsie could only see a worse sort of squalor than any cottage in Oldbury would have shown, had a halo of interest from associations with past times for her. They did not see anything of Mrs. Neale on the evening of their arrival. Elsie

had to wait till the middle of the next day for an introduction to her grandmother, whom she began rather to dread seeing.

Margaret warned her before she took her into Mrs. Neale's room, that she must not show any emotion when her grandmother spoke to her first. She must be quite composed, and meet her in a commonplace way, as if she had always been in the habit of seeing her every day.

"Mrs. Neale was not precisely an invalid," Margaret said; "but she was a person who had always dreaded excitement of a painful nature. Yet she had been a good friend to them—a faithful friend, and they owed her all the more gratitude for persevering in seeing them, because her inclination would have led her to avoid the painful thoughts that their presence must bring."

Elsie pictured to herself a cold, apathetic personage, from whom she feared she should always shrink away; and she could hardly summon courage to follow Margaret into the little upstairs boudoir where Mrs. Neale sat. Her first glance round the room caused her an agreeable surprise. It was a pretty room, bright and carefully kept, very unlike all the other parts of the house she had previously seen. There were vases of cut flowers on the table, a small cheerful fire in the grate, a stand holding a work-basket, and a pile of library books drawn conveniently near an arm-chair, from which rose a tall, graceful lady, much younger looking than Elsie had expected, and with traces of great beauty on her face. She held out both hands, drew Elsie towards her, and gave her a quick kiss on each cheek.

"So this is little Alice," she said, in a tone of rather forced cheerfulness. Then dropping Elsie's hands, she sank into her chair as hastily as she had risen, leaned back, and shut her eyes.

"Yes," she said, after a moment's silence, during which Margaret had approached her chair rather anxiously; "there is certainly more likeness than from your description I was prepared to see; but I don't mean to allow myself to be overcome. I will see her for a few minutes every day till I get accustomed to it."

She made several remarks on indifferent subjects to Margaret before she turned to Elsie again, and then surprised her by beginning to question her on her pursuits and accomplishments.

"Of course she has never seen any one in her life," Mrs. Neale said, turning to Margaret, when Elsie had made a hesitating answer or two. "How could she in Oldbury, or

indeed, unhappily, how could we show her to anybody anywhere? Poor child! one almost wishes she had been plain—it would have been less tantalizing; for what use can beauty or advantages of any kind ever be to her?"

Margaret made no answer, and Mrs. Neale, taking up a book from the stand, observed, "There, my dear, I think that will do for the present. You had perhaps better go now. It only wants half an hour* to my dinner-time; and I am always obliged to be perfectly silent and quiet before and after eating. I will see Alice—or Elsie I think you call her—again for a quarter of an hour in the afternoon; and by and bye perhaps I may be able to let her read aloud to me. She looks as if she would read well."

Elsie received two more hasty kisses, and Mrs. Neale looked approvingly at her as she moved towards the door.

"She really is a sweetly pretty creature," she said aside to Margaret; "but have you not put her into very coarse, heavy mourning? Has she nothing else she can wear while she is here?"

"Nothing different from what you have seen," Margaret answered. "You know my scruples. I cannot bear to spend more than is absolutely necessary on ourselves, while——"

"Yes, yes; but you carry the principle a great deal too far. I have never gone along with you. However, we will not dispute the point. Alice has always been your charge since her poor mother's death, and of course I shall not begin to interfere now."

Elsie looked up at Margaret as they left the room together.

"I don't think I can ever call her grandmother," she said in a low voice. "How different she is!"

"Yes," Margaret answered; "but we will not judge her. She has never failed in substantial kindness since our misfortunes, as many whom we once esteemed close friends have done. She was a prosperous, admired, successful woman, living much in the gay world, till the blow came that cut her off from all her old pleasures at once. She could never bear to face her old companions after her son-in-law's disgrace. She has shut herself up in that room, and tried to hedge herself in from painful thoughts, and from absolutely seeing and feeling the change in her position. It is not by any means a good way of bearing the trial; but perhaps it is the only one she has strength for. Your poor mother died."

"Took that way of slipping out of the trouble, and evading her share," Margaret's words almost seemed to imply.

"Was not that the worst part of the trial to Mrs. Neale? Did she not love Mamma very much?" Elsie asked.

"She was very proud of her beauty; but your mother married young: she and Mrs. Neale both lived very much for society, and necessarily saw but little of each other. Mrs. Neale's chief affection has always been given to her son, Gilbert."

"The one who is alive still?" asked Elsie.

"Yes," said Margaret; "but we shall not see him. He will certainly not come near the house while we are staying here."

After that first visit Elsie spent an hour or so each day in Mrs. Neale's room. She received the same quick kisses—two at coming and two at going, never more nor less—and meanwhile was questioned on such ordinary topics as a visitor might be entertained with, or set to read one of the circulating library novels, of which Mrs. Neale always had a large supply in hand. Now and then Mrs. Neale would interrupt the reading to open out to Elsie on some recollection of her past life. For the first day or two Elsie listened breathlessly, expecting some mention of her father or her mother, which would make her feel more familiar with them; but nothing of the kind ever came. It was on account of some *fête* at which Mrs. Neale had assisted years before, or a lively description of some celebrity to whom she had been introduced, and who had admired her, with which her grandmother entertained her. Occasionally she would wind up with a lamentation that Elsie would never know anything of similar pleasures—that the world of fashionable society in which her grandmother and mother had shone such conspicuous stars was definitely closed to her. There was anger as well as pity in Mrs. Neale's bright eyes whenever a few words of this kind passed her lips. She looked almost grudgingly at Elsie's lovely face, as if this were another good thing of which the enjoyment had been cruelly snatched away from her.

These glimpses at Mrs. Neale's past experiences were as great a contrast to the subjects that usually occupied Elsie's thoughts, as the bright room in which the hostess lived was to all the other parts of the house. During the many hours when she was not with her grandmother, Elsie wandered about the neglected, silent rooms, where footsteps and voices were seldom heard from year's end to year's end. She lifted the lids of inlaid work-boxes, and looked down into quaint, costly vases, round which sickly odours of long since evaporated perfumes lingered, and tried to fancy how they had looked in past times, and speculated what other faces had bent near, and what other hands had touched them.

The life lived in these rooms, when they had been constantly occupied, had not been one that had left any personal or home-like relic behind. It was the flavour of past gaieties and of suddenly interrupted amusements that lingered about the place, and gave it its indescribable air of gloom. It was to escape from this that Mrs. Neale had shut herself up in her retreat. Elsie meditated a great deal on the difference between Mrs. Neale's way of taking her trial and Margaret's, and decided within herself that, after all, the solemn acceptance of sorrow as the appointed lot of their lives, which had given its character to the Oldbury home, was preferable to the ineffectual struggle to keep thought at bay, which made the ghastly contrasts of the life here. She observed with some surprise that, in spite of their utter unlikeness of character, there was a strong bond of mutual affection between Margaret and Mrs. Neale. Little disposed as Margaret was to tolerate weakness or self-indulgence, she was always ready to make excuses for Mrs. Neale's faults; and when she spoke to her, or performed any little personal service for her, there would come a faint flush of colour, and a softening of all the lines of her handsome, clear cut face, that for a moment or two restored something of the glow and charm of youth to her countenance.

Elsie pondered much in her solitary hours over these revelations of Margaret's inner life. Would her life, she asked herself, be like this one whose secrets she was divining at last? Could she go on living after the love, which now seemed the one absorbing interest of her existence, had been quite put aside, and allowed to live as a faint remembrance only? Would she, years hence, return to some house, where the ghost of her love would look out upon her as the ghost of Margaret's did in this.

Once, about a week after she came to London, Elsie passed down Eaton Square when she was out walking with Crawford, and observed a carriage stop at a door, from which a young lady alighted, ran quickly up the steps, and passed into the house.

"That's Sir Cecil Russel's house, and the young lady who ran in is Miss Russel, who was down in Oldbury so long. Did you see her?" Crawford asked.

Elsie had recognized Cecil at the very first glimpse; and when she disappeared she stood still, staring blankly at the closed door, and could hardly bring herself to move on, even when Crawford called her.

This incident did not by any means add to Elsie's comfort. After that day she always had a feverish, restless longing for

the hour to come at which Margaret was accustomed to send her out for a daily walk with Crawford. If it rained, or if Crawford was busy and could not go out with her, she was more unhappy than usual the whole day. When she did get out, all her thoughts were absorbed in the one hope that Crawford's errands would lead her to take the way she wanted to go. She seldom had courage herself to propose that they should walk down Eaton Square; but if they did pass Sir Cecil's house, she felt as if the object of the walk had been attained. She had glanced up at the windows, and seen a curtain flutter; or a footman passed up the doorsteps and gave in a letter while she was by; or at the very least she had breathed a whiff of perfume from the geraniums and mignonette in Cecil's balcony. She went home satisfied—a sort of link between herself and the inhabitants of that house had to her fancy been woven; and the rest of the day passed in comparative content.

At last a morning came—a chill December morning—when she went out, after having been confined to the house by nearly a fortnight's rain, and looking up at Sir Cecil's house saw signs that made her heart die within her. The windows and doors were wide open; work-people were passing in and out. A van laden with furniture stood at the door. Elsie entreated Crawford to stop and ask what it meant. The careless surprised answers brought no comfort.

Yes; this house did once belong to Sir Cecil Russel, but he had gone abroad for several years, and now the house was let again, and another family were coming immediately to live in it.

All Elsie's eagerness to walk out disappeared after that day, and she relapsed into a state of listlessness and depression that greatly distressed and puzzled Margaret.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A REFT IN THE CLOUD.

IN the beginning of the next year Margaret went to Dartmoor to pay her last visit to the prisoner there, who was to be released in the coming spring. She went quite alone. Since his wife's death Mr. Blake had been gradually sinking into a state of apathy, from which he could not be roused to undertake the journey. When Margaret spoke of it to him, he listened attentively for a time, a look of sorrowful intelligence would come on his face, and he seemed to struggle to call together his wandering thoughts, and brace himself for some effort he had to make. But the instant she ceased to speak, the impression of her words passed away, the blank look settled on his face again, and he would begin to mutter the words of a problem or a passage from some book to himself. After a time, Margaret left off urging him to come with her, for she thought that the sight of him in his present state would be a greater pain to his son than even the disappointment of seeing her standing for the first time alone at the prison grate where so many sad interviews had already taken place.

Elsie made a frightened, half-shrinking offer to accompany her aunt to Dartmoor ; but Margaret, though pleased that she should show even a slight desire to see her father, thought it better not to take her. The expression of the wish, however, opened her heart to talk to Elsie about her father more freely than she had ever done before. She did not in any degree attempt to excuse his crime ; but she spoke of his deep penitence, and dwelt much on the love for his little daughter, which alone

of all his previous interests had survived the numbing effects of much solitude and excessive manual labour.

The day before Margaret set out on her expedition she read aloud to Elsie all the letters that her father had written since his imprisonment. With the exception of the passages in them that referred to herself, they sounded to Elsie somewhat meagre and cold. Margaret pointed out a spot here and there where the paper was still crisp and blistered with the tears that had fallen on it when the letter had been first read ; but the few words of bitter self-accusation that had called forth these tears did not move Elsie as they had moved those to whom they were addressed long ago. The suffering she had herself endured was too strong in her mind for any expression of remorse for the sin that had caused it to seem quite adequate. She sat dry-eyed while Margaret read, angry with herself for feeling so hard and cold, and for being able to see nothing but the dark chasm dividing her from all natural joy and communion with her fellows, which this man's crimes had rent. How was it that Margaret felt so differently ? How had she learnt to merge all thoughts of her own loss in such supreme pity for the guilty one, that the necessity of sharing his punishment seemed a privilege of kinship instead of an unjust doom ?

Margaret was to spend a night with a friend at Southampton, and had to be absent the greater part of two days. It was a trying time to Elsie, but it did her good. The necessity of occupying herself incessantly in attendance on her grandfather, who missed Margaret very much, broke the habit of brooding over her own griefs to which she had been yielding ; and when she had an instant's leisure, her thoughts, instead of reverting to their usual train, followed Margaret on her journey, and occupied themselves in picturing the scene in the prison, when Margaret and her father would undergo the last of their many constrained, painful meetings—face to face, but with hands between them, and no touch, not even a clasp of the hand possible. What would be said ? What questions would be asked ? Her name would come into their talk there, where she shuddered to think of its having been spoken so often. And then Elsie tried hard to turn her thoughts quite from herself, and call up the marred, miserable, labour-worn face, from whose lips, as Margaret had told her, her name so often came. She made herself look at it, tried to see the love for her written on it, and would not let any vision of Steenie's face, with another kind of love for her in his eyes, float up and thrust her father's

away. No ; this sad face was hers to love, not the other bright one. She must take this into her heart and thoughts, and let the other go. If she could but do it less grudgingly ; if only the contrast would not look so terribly great, so hard to grow accustomed to !

There was an evening service at a church close to Mrs. Neale's house, which Margaret and Elsie were in the frequent habit of attending ; and on the first day of Margaret's absence, Elsie, leaving Mr. Blake asleep in his chair, ventured to slip away for the short hour the service lasted. She felt it would be a help to her to bring the struggle she was carrying on within herself into the still atmosphere of the church, within hearing of mingled voices murmuring prayers for help, into the presence of bowed heads, some of which might be weighed down with grief as heavy as her own. She expected to receive comfort ; but she found a greater deliverance than she had looked for. A stranger to her read the service. The words of the prayers seemed to have a new meaning to Elsie from the trembling earnestness with which they were spoken ; but she did not look up till the Creed was read. " I believe in the Holy Ghost, The Holy Catholic Church, The Communion of Saints, The Forgiveness of Sins." The solemn triumph of the tone in which the last sentence was uttered brought the words into Elsie's heart with a start of wonder that she had never rightly felt their meaning before. She lifted up her head and caught a look on the speaker's face, in his far-seeing eyes, in his strong, compassionate, sorrowful mouth, which intensified the impression the words had made upon her. " The forgiveness of sins." The belief he was stating was clearly more to him than a joyful, comfortable assurance of personal pardon merely. In speaking the words he seemed to be taking upon him a great weight of obligation—to forgive while being forgiven, to shrink from no partnership in suffering, from no toil and struggle to undo the effects of others' sin which perfect forgiveness includes. Elsie knelt down at the next prayer with a new thought in her mind ; an illumination had fallen on her difficult path which made it no longer seem so very hard to tread.

The sermon that followed made the dawning thought grow each moment clearer. It was on the divine humanity of Christ, and the unity of the race under His headship. As Elsie listened, the bitter sense of injustice in her lot which had been troubling her for many months, quite passed away. It began no longer to seem so dark and horrible a thing to be condemned

to share the punishment of another's guilt. She learned that this was the privilege, the meaning of kinship, the condition of union with the Head, who had suffered for all. The mystery of pain, of the innocent suffering with the guilty, became a little clearer. She felt she was no longer alone. Her pain seemed useless, meaningless no longer. There was One bearing it with her, knitting her to Himself and to all her fellows in the great divine and human task of endurance, of bringing good from evil, of sorrowing and suffering with and for all.

Elsie went home with a peace and calm in her heart she had never known before. The hardness she had wondered at and lamented over in herself disappeared now that she had accepted sacrifice as the Divine law of life. She discovered that she had been harsh and unforgiving—not from indignation against sin, but from a grudge in her heart at having to share in its punishment. The thought of the Perfect Son of Man choosing to suffer with those He saved softened her, while it gave her fresh courage to endure her own share of pain.

Margaret returned home the next day, and Elsie received her with an affectionate warmth of welcome, which showed Margaret at once that a happy change had come over her spirit, and that the dark apathy of self-involved grief was at length shaken off.

As they talked together that evening, and Elsie, instead of shrinking from the subject, showed an earnest desire to learn all she could about her father, that she might prepare herself to be to him what he hoped to find her, Margaret felt for the first time in many, many years that she had a companion in the task of bearing the family burdens—some one near her who could give her support and comfort in return for what she was always giving. Elsie would have been well repaid for her efforts, if she had known the rest that this discovery brought to Margaret's weary heart.

The last few months had been more painful to Margaret than all the previous years of her long trial. The return to old haunts and habits, if it had brought interest and excitement, had also brought a renewal of vivid pain such as she had believed she could never feel again, and that last interview with her brother, once looked forward to as a joyful epoch, had proved more depressing than any she had experienced hitherto. She had been shocked at the change the last half-year had made in her brother's health and appearance. Since the news of the shortening of the term of his imprisonment had been imparted to him, he had been seized with a fever of impatience for the

hour of release to come, which was wearing him down more rapidly than the labour and suffering of the years when release had seemed too distant to be worth hoping for. Margaret confessed to Elsie that she wished now she had consented to her request and taken her to Dartmoor. Her father seemed to have laid aside his once absorbing desire to conceal his guilt from his only child, and to be possessed only by a terror lest he should after all never enjoy the sight his eyes craved.

As the hour of his discharge drew near, it was each day more and more impossible to him to believe that he should live till it came.

To Margaret also the months that had to be worn through before the dreaded, wished-for day arrived, looked terribly long. She did not know how she could have borne them, if Elsie had not just then changed from being an anxious charge into a sympathizing helper.

In the course of the winter, Margaret, her father, and Elsie left Mrs. Neale's house and went into lodgings in a neighbouring street. Gilbert Neale was coming to spend some weeks with his mother, and they wished to be settled in a home of their own before he arrived. While he remained in London, Elsie went twice every day, at stated times, to see her grandmother, but Margaret never accompanied her on these visits. Her uncle used to come into Mrs. Neale's boudoir while she was there, and would often sit watching her for a long time together, with a softened, sorrowful expression on his stern face; but he spoke little to her, and they did not make much advance towards acquaintanceship. She, on her part, had a shrinking from him. She could not forget, even in her softened mood, that he had interfered (it might be rightly, she could not judge of that) to separate her from Stephen Pierrepont.

One day, when they chanced to be going down the staircase together, he startled her by a sudden question.

"Do you ever hear anything of young Pierrepont now?" he said abruptly.

"No," Elsie answered, with a look of appeal against the cruelty of the question in her eyes.

"Well, well, I did not mean to vex you, but it was right that I should know. He has been kind to my nephew, and I should have been very sorry if he had been brought into any trouble through a connexion of mine. For your sake, as well as his, it is best that there should be nothing between you.

Whatever you think about it at present, you may take my word that I am right."

Elsie hurried away, without attempting an answer. She did not want him to see the tears of indignation and pain that would force themselves into her eyes, and she could not trust herself to speak.

Nothing further ever passed between them on the subject; but those few words were enough to revive a good deal of the bitter feeling Elsie hoped she had succeeded in putting quite away from her.

Did people who had crushed out their own loves (for sufficient reasons, perhaps) necessarily grow as harsh and cold as this uncle of hers seemed to be? She wondered often what he and Margaret had been like in their happy days. It interested her to observe that there was a certain resemblance between them now; for she thought it showed that, far apart as their outward lives had been, there had remained a link of sympathy between them. Each in thought and recollection had been living unconsciously with the other. They had suffered together, and grown as much alike in their utter separation, as constant intercourse might have made them.

Before Mr. Neale left London he called once at the Blakes' lodgings, and had an interview with Margaret and Elsie. It was merely on matters of business he came to speak to them. He was Elsie's trustee, and had the management of some property she would inherit from her mother; and now that her father was likely to return home, he thought it necessary to make some fresh arrangements which he wished to explain to them.

It was to Mr. Blake nominally that the explanations were offered; but as it was found impossible to fix his attention for more than a minute at a time on anything that was being said, Margaret had to act for him, and take the chief part in a discussion of future plans which grew out of the statements Mr. Neale laid before her.

Elsie sat silently by Margaret's side, listening and wondering. All day she had been the more agitated of the two at the prospect of this meeting; and now it was she, and not Margaret, whose mind was in a tumult, and whose thoughts refused to fix themselves on the every-day business details that had to be discussed.

Would the time ever come, she wondered fearfully, when she and Stephen would meet, after years and years of separation,

and touch hands coldly, and sit opposite each other at a table, and talk in quiet, measured tones of deeds and money and places of abode, and ways and means of living; like strangers, or indifferent acquaintances? No; very, very unlike either, Elsie acknowledged to herself.

Two strangers or two indifferent acquaintances could hardly have gone on talking so long without their coming to one or the other—some little relaxation of the face from its studied quietness, some touch of feeling into a tone of voice, some little look or chance word that made an approach to cordiality. There must be a great deal of strong feeling underneath to need such careful guarding. If something should startle them into being themselves for a moment? If Margaret's voice were to change? If she were to glance up from her slow reading aloud to her father of the letter Mr. Neale had put into her hands, and meet the look in the deep-set grey eyes opposite her, which Elsie perceived were studying her face by stealth, learning it jealously by heart, as she read, what would happen then? Elsie felt oppressed, as if she could hardly breathe in the oppressive atmosphere of choked-up emotion she was in.

At length it was over: the last paper signed, the last explanation given. Margaret rose from her seat as soon as the business was concluded, as if to intimate that the interview must end there; Mr. Neale seemed disposed to linger a few moments longer, but there was nothing in Margaret's face to encourage him to enter on any fresh topic of discourse. She stood quiet and cold, looking towards him steadily, with eyes from which all expression seemed to have been purposely withdrawn, as she awaited his farewell. Then he shook hands with them all silently, and left the room.

Margaret drew a long sigh as the door closed behind him.

"It is over," she said, with the slight tremor in her voice which Elsie had been listening for all the morning. "It is over. We have taken the first necessary step towards inaugurating the new life we are all to begin when your father comes back to us, and now we have only to enter upon it thankfully."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

RELEASE.

ELSIE had believed herself almost indifferent about the plans for the future which Margaret had discussed with Mr. Neale : but when she found it was definitely arranged that the whole family were to emigrate to America as soon as her father was set at liberty, and that they were to sail early in the spring, she was more dismayed at the prospect than she had expected to be.

Leaving England, she discovered meant to her getting farther and farther away from Oldbury, and putting herself quite beyond the possibility of happy chances arising that might take her in the way of hearing old friends' names, or regaining some link of associations with the places that were dear to her. She did not hate London quite so much now as she had done at first; and when she compared it with the far-off American city to which they were bound, she began to love it dearly. Once she had seen Mr. Pierrepont's name in a printed announcement of a charity sermon he was to preach in a church not very distant from where they lived; once she had passed an Oldbury person in the street, an Oldbury tradesman, who had recognized her, and taken off his cap to her. In England such events would be always possible; and though Elsie smiled at herself for her folly in prizing such incidents so dearly, she found it cost her a hard wrench to put herself finally beyond all chance of their recurrence. She and Margaret spent many hours during the next two months working at the outfit for their voyage. Margaret grew more cheerful as each week passed. She would talk a great deal to Elsie, as they sat together over their work, about the sort of life in America she hoped they would lead. She drew attractive pictures of a quiet little farm-

house in some sparsely populated district, where they would make their home and find rest and healthful occupation amid deep country quiet, and with scenes of a new kind of natural beauty round them, which would have no painful associations linked with it. They two, herself and Elsie, must take all the care and work of the household on themselves, not looking for any help or much companionship from the new inmate they would have. Margaret found it impossible to speak to Elsie of her father as any other father might have been spoken of to a daughter who had not seen him since her babyhood. Seventeen years of monotonous labour and association with depraved companions had driven away every trace of former cultivation, and irretrievably injured his mental faculties. Liberty could give him nothing now but rest, and the pitying love of the relations whose lives he had spoiled.

Seventeen years! Margaret would let her work fall from her hands sometimes and remain silent, while her thoughts flew back over the years with a kind of wonder that they should have been lived through. Seventeen years! And all that time his mother's thoughts and hers had followed the unhappy one down through every step of degradation and pain; accompanying him day by day in drudgery and shame and remorse; mixing every hour of theirs with the thought of what his was—never losing sight of that; and now it was all but over. In a few more days he would be restored to them.

The work went on rapidly, and with the first spring days, when the budding of the trees in the parks, and the scent of the early flowers that were carried about the streets, made ~~her~~ think more than ever of Oldbury, Elsie began to lay the clothes she had made in the chests that were to accompany them on their voyage, scattering here and there a few precious lavender blossoms that Crawford had brought from their Oldbury garden. On what strange foreign air would the dear scent float when the lids of the boxes were raised again! It had been very strange to her, working at her father's clothes, and marking them with his name; and now, as she arranged them where his hands would take them out, the thought of him which, in spite of all her efforts had remained hazy, grew more distinct, and a stronger feeling of love came into her mind. A father after all, whatever else he was! A father for her who had never known father or mother. She began to be almost as anxious for the days to pass as Margaret, and to weary of them with the same feverish fancy that they lengthened out into interminable

duration as they were counted by fewer numbers. A month! a fortnight! ten days! one day! and Margaret with her own hands packed up the suit of clothes her brother was to put on when he left the prison, and set out on her last expedition to Dartmoor.

Old Mr. Blake's bodily health was improving, while his mind grew feeble. He seemed to give little heed to the preparations that were going on round him, and Margaret believed that neither the excitement of his son's return nor the long voyage to America would affect him injuriously. It had been arranged that they were to leave London for Liverpool, whence the ship sailed in which their passage to New York was taken, two days after the long-looked-for reunion had taken place.

Margaret set out early in the day, and was to return in the evening. It was a sunny April day, and in the course of the afternoon Elsie persuaded her grandfather to walk to a quiet part of Kensington Gardens with her.

The great black-trunked trees in the Park were glorious in their brief sheeny spring green. Scents of hawthorn in bloom floated in the air. As Elsie walked along glancing here and there, she felt as if she were taking a special solemn farewell of England and of her old life. She did not wish the hours of this day to pass away quickly.

Something (for since Margaret set out in the morning the lazy impression of her father had returned, and she could hardly say some one) was coming into the house to-night that would begin a new epoch in her life!

* She meant it to be a time of true consecration. She prayed for strength to devote herself to her new duties utterly and quite ungrudgingly, but just this one day—this last. English Old World day—might be given to thoughts of the past, and to tender farewells to all the beloved objects she was turning her back upon for ever.

Mr. Blake was soon tired of walking, and they sat down to rest on a bench overlooking the water opposite the old Palace. How green and gay it all was! The water spread out like a thin sheet of silver at their feet. The young leaves over their heads fluttered in the warm wind. Elsie stared up through the branches into the blue above. They might almost as well have been Oldbury trees—she felt she loved them so.

"Good-bye, good-bye!" seemed to come silently from her heart with every breath she drew.

A gentleman and lady came, after a time, and sat down on a

bench beside her. She would have moved away, but her grandfather had sunk into a doze, half-leaning against her, and she did not like to disturb him. The gentleman drew a newspaper from his pocket and began to read. By and bye he called his companion's attention to a paragraph.

"Ah! I see the Chinese mail is in. Here is something about Sir Cecil Russel's arrival at Shanghai. Is he not a relative of yours? I think I met a son and daughter of his at your house last spring. Very pleasant young people I thought they were."

"His daughter and his nephew; they have both gone out with him. He has no son. Yes, they are relatives of ours; we are very fond of them. We had letters from the young people this morning full of amusing descriptions of their adventures on the voyage. But don't you find the sun very hot here? Let us get up and walk under the trees, while I tell you their news!"

How Elsie longed to follow and take hold of the benevolent looking lady's dress, and beg her, as a famishing person might beg for bread, for a word or two out of those letters—a scrap of the news she was pouring into indifferent ears! She need not say who she was, and it would not do him any harm to learn by chance some day, years hence, that some one who was going far away, never to come back again—never to be heard of in England again—had sat on that bench and craved for the news of him.

What folly! what folly! Elsie pressed her foot firmly against the ground to keep herself from moving, and sat staring stupidly after the lady's floating purple silk dress as it receded down the grassy glade, through light and shadow, and then vanished from her sight, leaving the walk to its groups of ragged children and black London sheep again!

A far-off church clock struck five, and woke her out of her reverie. In another hour, Margaret would have returned—Margaret and her father. It was time to be moving. The hour for dreaming and regretting was over. She roused Mr. Blake, and they walked slowly homewards.

Crawford had been busy preparing refreshments for the travellers, and getting what she called the master's room ready. There was nothing for Elsie to do after she got home, when she had seated her grandfather in his arm-chair, and taken off her walking dress, but wander about the house and wait for Margaret's coming, with such calmness as she could command.

She did not know whether it was excessive joy or excessive fear that made her turn so sick and faint as she stood at the window looking out. Crawford came and joined her in her watch. Her eyes were red and swollen as if she had been crying a great deal over her work of preparation.

"If only my dear mistress had been here this day," she said, in answer to Elsie's inquiring look. "Ah, my dear! hers was a faithful, tender heart; and I can't get over her not being here to see the end. Nobody but me knew all she suffered. You must think of her, Miss Elsie, and of what she would have done for him if she had lived, whenever you need to keep your courage up. You must try not to tremble and look so white, dear; for with her gone, and your grandfather as he is to-day, it's a melancholy coming back after all!"

Elsie would have heeded her injunction if she could, but in spite of her efforts at self-control her face grew a shade paler still. As Crawford finished speaking, a cab stopped at the door, and there was Margaret helping out a white-haired man, almost as old and feeble-looking as her grandfather, who seemed to cling to Margaret's arm for support, and stared round with a bewildered, helpless air as they mounted the steps together. Elsie flew downstairs and opened the door for them.

Margaret smiled at her, though her eyes were swimming in tears; but the new-comer did not seem to see her, and took no notice of her outstretched hands.

"He is more overcome with the journey than I expected," said Margaret. "The fresh air and the number of new objects he has seen bewilder him. He thinks it is all one of the visions he has been used to have in the prison, and he is afraid of our melting away and leaving him. Let me take him up stairs, and in a little time the confusion will go off; and he will understand that it is really you who are near him at last."

"Father, this is Herbert come back to us," Margaret said quietly, as she led her brother up to her father's chair, and the father and son—bowed down, grey-headed men both, the circumstances of whose meeting seemed calculated to call forth such strong emotion—stood face to face, looking at each other languidly, with vague flickerings of intelligence and recognition passing over their faces as they gazed.

"Yes, it is Herbert," Margaret said again gently; "Herbert, who has been away so long, come back, never to leave us again." And then she led her brother to a seat and signed to Elsie to come and kiss him.

The meeting was over—the dreaded, longed-for meeting. It had been quite different from anything Elsie had expected, different from her hopes and her fears; but on the whole she was satisfied. She felt she could love her father. The worn face, from which even the expression of suffering had died out into one of dull, hopeless apathy, told a tale of past misery that made her forget everything else in pity. There was no need to fear that he would not want her help, or that he would be hard to please. His eyes followed her about the room wistfully all the evening whenever she moved, as if they could never be satisfied with seeing.

“This is little Alice. You are sure this is my little daughter Alice, and that she will stay with me?” he asked Margaret many times, while Elsie busied herself in waiting on him, and once or twice he hesitated to take things out of her hand, as if he did not believe they were real. His mind refused to grasp the joy of reunion, once so passionately longed for.

This first evening of freedom, though Margaret sat close to him all the time, and Elsie held his roughened hands clasped in hers, was very little better to him than one of the many previous visions of it he had had while it was still far distant. They could not make him feel sure that all he saw would not by and bye melt away before his eyes—could not succeed in making themselves more than deceiving images of the brain to him.

When they were not actually speaking to him he relapsed into a moody reverie, in which he seemed quite unaware of their presence, a state of mind which isolated him from them almost as completely as if he had been spirited back to his prison cell again.

Only now and then, when some object near him caught his eye, a book or a trifle from Elsie's work-box, he would start, and take it up eagerly in his hand, examine it closely, and lay it down again with a look of half-puzzled satisfaction dawning on his face.

The evening—every minute of which Elsie used to struggle to recall and fix in her memory afterwards—wore away almost in silence.

They sat together till very late, all three hand in hand; and when at last Margaret rose, and said they must separate for the night, a fuller consciousness of their presence rushed to the released prisoner's brain, and he showed far more emotion at the prospect of losing sight of them for a few hours, than his first meeting with his daughter had called forth

Margaret and Elsie followed him to his room, and he held their hands and looked at them with hungry, despairing eyes, and could hardly be persuaded to let them leave him.

"It is only for a few hours," Margaret said cheerfully. "Hours, remember, not months. You shall see us the instant you open your eyes in the morning, and you will be able to enjoy it better for having slept."

For a long time her words made no impression. It seemed impossible for him to measure the length of the separation, or look across the gulf of the night to the next day; but at last he became calmer, and consented to let them go.

"Yes," he said, "I understand, it will be morning when I see you again. Morning—daylight. I shall be able to understand things more clearly then, when I have slept. Yes, I am sure of it now, I shall see you both again in the morning. I do not deserve it, but I shall see you, and meanwhile I shall be glad to sleep."

Margaret looked into his room an hour afterwards, and told Elsie that he was sleeping tranquilly in the bed, with quite a smile on his face, and a look that recalled himself, as she had known him long ago, in the times when her recollections of him were pleasantest. She gave way then to the first tears she had shed that day, a flood of gentle, thankful tears, which washed away the pain of years from her heart. She told Elsie how impossible it had once seemed that such a day as this should ever come: how in her first horror of her brother's guilt she had had dire struggles with herself before she could come even to wish for it; and how, when his repentance had softened her heart towards him, she had sickened in despair at the thought of the long, long years, and the improbability there was of his having strength to drag through them.

Now that the day had come, it had brought its own pain.

"You see how it is," Margaret said to Elsie. "His body is released, but his mind cannot escape from bondage as easily. Solitude and suffering have built it into a prison-house, which we shall find it hard to throw down. Did you not feel how far away he was from us? How shall we get him altogether, and bring his soul as well as his body home to live with us and be healed by our love?"

Margaret could not sleep during the night for thoughts such as these. In the early dawn of the summer morning she got up and dressed, and stole noiselessly into her brother's room, to see if he still slept. She thought it probable he would wake

early, and she wished to save him an hour or two of confused and anxious thought by being present at his waking.

Her first glance showed her that he had not stirred since she had left him on the previous evening. His head rested peacefully on the pillow, his right hand lay over the counterpane in the same position she had observed before. He had been very weary, and slept profoundly now. Margaret came close up to the side of the bed. In the faint light the sleeping face looked rounder and younger than it had done for many a year, the deeply graven lines in the forehead seemed to have been smoothed out by repose. There was a smile on the lips that carried Margaret back years, to dim recollections of nursery days. She knelt down softly by the bed to pray till he should awake.

A flood-tide of recollections, sweet, terrible, bitter, peaceful again, swept over her while her head was bowed. This was he—the beloved playmate of her childhood; the admired elder brother of her youth; he who had for so many years been the dark shadow in the household; he who had spoiled all their lives. She glanced back over the grey, monotonous years of her existence, till she reached its bright dawn of youth, when so much joy seemed to lie before her. Truly it was his doing that all her earthly happiness had been snatched away from her. With the thought her heart went up to heaven in a great cry. She did not grudge her life; she had no account against this unhappy one; only, as the picture of the dismal life that had wrought ill instead of good rose up before her, she prayed for herself and for Elsie that it might be given to them to undo some little of the wrong, to use the experience their own sorrow had brought them, to lighten suffering somewhere, and so make the final result something less terrible. She did not fear that, having repented, he would not be forgiven. She was speaking to the Great Atoner, who had taught her to forgive; but she thought of the time when this sin-debased soul should have grown large enough, become pure enough, to see the wrong and misery he had wrought in its full significance, and to hate it as it deserved to be hated, and she shuddered at the fearfulness of the vision it would have to meet. Must not forgiveness itself, love itself, be for a time the keenest punishment possible? In virtue of her kinship, Margaret felt the burden of the wrong done to be hers as well as his. The rest of her life seemed too short to spend in toil to make the account (not between him and his God, but between him and his fellows) something straighter.

The sun had risen, and there was broad daylight in the room when Margaret lifted her head from her prayer. When would the sleeper awake? A strong sunbeam streaming through a crevice in the window-curtain rested on his face, now showing it distinctly, white against the white pillow, the smiling, parted lips quite still.

A sudden pang of fear shot through Margaret's heart. She laid her hand over the hand on the counterpane. Its icy touch made her spring to her feet, and utter a cry that brought Crawford and Elsie into the room.

Crawford saw how it was in a moment. She drew Elsie from the room and returned to Margaret, who had dropped on her knees by the bedside again. Yes, it was all over. A very slight examination served to show that he had been dead some hours. He must have died in sleep almost directly after he laid himself down.

The night that had divided them was longer than they had expected, and the morning that was to bring them together again removed from it by a wider space. Yet Margaret could repose her heart in trust that the morning of reunion would surely come.

"It is best so," she said to Elsie, when she brought her a few hours afterwards to kiss the cold forehead of the corpse stretched out on the bed; "he has been permitted to bear all the long punishment, and now body and soul are both free!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

THE death of Herbert le Fevre removed the principal reasons that had weighed with Margaret in determining to leave England. After her brother was gone, she had no longer any motive strong enough to induce her to brave a long journey with so helpless a charge as her father in his present state of health, or to encounter the inconvenience of settling in a new country with no other companions than her father, Elsie, and Crawford. She continued for some time, after her brother's death, to make plans for leaving London, and taking a house in some quiet country place like Oldbury; but Elsie, equally with herself, shrank from the effort necessary for carrying out such a scheme. They allowed the weeks to slip on without doing anything, and gradually stronger inducements than mere distaste for change grew up to keep them stationary.

Old Mrs. Neale attached herself more and more to Elsie, and became so dependent on her society for her comfort, that Margaret was unwilling to separate her grand-daughter from her as long as she lived. Mr. Blake seemed to prefer the bustle and movement of the town; and Margaret found work in association with other workers of kindred spirit to herself among the very poor of London, which enabled her to fulfil her purpose of devoting the rest of her life to the relief of suffering more effectually than she could have done anywhere else.

As months passed on, Elsie observed that a gradual change came over Margaret. She was not less grave than she used to be, but she was a great deal gentler. Her eyes lost the stony, far-off look they used to have; a smile would come into them now when they fell on a flower, or a happy faced child, or on

such a glimpse of sunset glory as can be seen between openings of houses in the dullest London streets and squares. She could look at beautiful things now without being stung with pain at the thought of one dear to her, to whom the sight of all beauty was forbidden. Though she was hardly aware of it herself, she was much happier than she had been for many years. She could rest and enjoy a fresh wind blowing in her face, or the scent of a flower, or Elsie's pleasant voice reading aloud to her, without the indefinable feeling of remorse for being comfortable, which used to come when every pleasure brought before her a contrast full of pain.

Outwardly her existence had much the same character it had had in Oldbury, but inwardly there was an immense change. She had ceased to lead a double life; an almost intolerable weight had been lifted from her heart. Her former scruples about mixing with her fellows were considerably modified. There was no longer any secret to be kept. To spare her father, she retained, and allowed Elsie to retain the name of Blake, but she was quite resolved that the painful circumstances of their family history should never again be concealed from any one with whom she was brought into contact. She confided the chief particulars of their story to the clergyman of the parish where they lived, asking him to repeat as much of it as he thought necessary to her fellow-labourers in the works of charity in which she was engaged, and after that she had no further difficulties or scruples. Her new associates all had too much work on their hands, and were too much accustomed to be brought into contact with tragical histories, to be disposed to show undue curiosity respecting hers, as the good, gossipy Oldbury people had done.

Mr. Blake did not now engross Margaret's whole time in attendance on himself, as he had done while they lived in Oldbury. Since his wife's death, and more especially during the last few months, he had seemed to prefer Elsie's company to Margaret's. He had quite laid aside the labour to perfect his literary work which he had persevered in fruitlessly for so many years. His anxiety about it seemed to have passed away entirely, and his mind to have reverted to the interests that had occupied him before he became engrossed in one special line of study. Elsie's voice and manner recalled his wife to him, as she had been in her youth, and all the associations of his earlier years came back to him whenever his grand-daughter was with him. The disappointments and anxieties of the intervening

time were evidently rapidly fading away from his memory. Margaret was glad to find that the spell which had bound him to such constant labour was broken at last; and knowing how good it was for Elsie to have the occupation of waiting on her grandfather, she did not scruple to give herself up more and more to the work among the poor that had opened out to her, and to leave the care of Mr. Blake a good deal in Elsie's hands. It was not such a heavy charge as it would have been some years ago. Mr. Blake was comparatively happy in his present delusions. In the summer time Elsie used to take him out into the parks, in the early morning and in the cool of the evenings, and he would find amusement in watching the riders or the stream of carriages pass by, while he talked to Elsie about old acquaintances and long-past pleasures, almost as eagerly as Mrs. Neale was in the habit of doing. Sometimes the riders who passed them, sauntering along in the cool, pleasant summer twilight, would turn round and cast a surprised glance after the strange, noble-looking old man, and the lovely, pale girl in half Quaker costume, who supported him with her arm, and wonder vacantly for a moment or two how such a pair came to be there alone, and what sorrowful history attached to their strange, beautiful looks. Yet there was so much dignity about Mr. Blake still, such an air of peculiar refinement in Elsie, that the boldest loungeur would not have dared to accost them or annoy them with any intrusive attentions.

Elsie felt more utterly alone with this crowd of strangers passing and repassing before her eyes than she would have felt in the most solitary spot anywhere in the neighbourhood of Oldbury. Now and then gentle girl faces in the carriages that drove by attracted her attention,—faces that seemed akin to her, as if they ought by rights to have belonged to sisters or friends of hers; or perhaps some pleasant looking lady, while walking near her, would speak a word or laugh a laugh that recalled Cecil's voice, and Elsie's heart yearned towards the speaker. Yet none the less did she feel divided from them all, by a gulf as great as if she and her grandfather were thin speechless ghosts wandering on the outskirts of a world they had quitted for ever—seeing all, but powerless to establish any communication with the substantial living people among whom they moved unseen.

Sometimes, as she listened to her grandfather's rambling talk about old times, and people long since passed away, she was half disposed to believe they had both died a long time ago, and had

wandered back by mistake to a world that had no place for them.

When the weather was not fine enough for walking, Mr. Blake's great pleasure was to frequent the reading-room of the British Museum Library—entrance tickets for which Gilbert Neale had procured both for him and Elsie. There he would contentedly spend the greater part of the day handling and seeming to read the books that were brought him. Pleasant associations always seemed to come back upon him while he was so occupied. He held his head higher—an expression of wistful half-intelligence came into his face. He looked almost the interested, eager student he had been in that same spot years and years before. Generally Elsie sat by his side reading, or copying illuminations from old missals; but sometimes she grew weary of the constraint of sitting still for so many hours, and when Mr. Blake was happily engaged, and did not seem to want her, she would leave the library, and on days when the Museum was not open to the general public, she would wander up and down the silent echoing galleries and staircases, till it was time to take her grandfather home. It was a weird kind of place to muse in, when the great halls were emptied of their usual crowd of visitors—but it suited Elsie's mood. The calm colossal heads staring blankly down on her, the broken fragments of statues, the beautiful strange sea things, the bright tropical birds and animals in their motionless mimicry of life, grew familiar, and seemed to enter into her reveries as constituent elements of them—miles and miles of dead, detached, broken things which had had some meaning, and some place, and some life of their own once—Elsie felt a great deal nearer to them, a great deal more at home with them, than with the people in the Park. No one interfered with her wanderings; the officials of the Museum took a kindly interest in the superannuated old scholar who haunted the library, and in the beautiful girl who watched over him so carefully, and they were all anxious to show her every courtesy in their power.

Weeks and months passed in this way, gliding rapidly into each other. The most intense pain is mitigated by time; and Elsie began to wonder at the tranquillity and peace that had come into her life. Was it peace, she sometimes asked herself, or was it only deadness? By the time another spring and summer and winter had gone by in the same quiet, eventless fashion, she could hardly believe herself to be the same person who had grown up in Oldbury, and felt as if her very life was being torn

from her when she had had to leave it. The time of strong feeling she had known there, of short, vivid joy and of agonizing pain, lay very, very far away from her now. It looked like another life, from which she thought she was definitely cut off. What had once seemed impossible to be borne appeared quite natural and inevitable now. One year would follow another just as the two last had done, quiet and grey, and she would bend her will more and more earnestly to the cheerful, contented bearing of her lot. New interests were gradually creeping into her life; and she knew she must honestly strive to make them thrust farther and farther away the thoughts that belonged to the past—the useless thoughts and regrets, that were alternately sweet and bitter, but always poisonous food for her mind to dwell on. During the first few months of her residence in London, several trifling incidents had concurred to put her in possession of small items of news respecting Oldbury and Oldbury people—foolish, useless pieces of information—which yet had filled her with immense joy, and made of the days on which she obtained them epochs of interest to count the passing of time by. Later these chances had become rarer, and the last year had not brought her a single one. Even the ingenious little schemes she sometimes concocted to make Margaret or Crawford talk of old times, and mention Oldbury names, seemed invariably to fail now. She began to think that a spell of silence had fallen on her that would never be broken again.

It was not that opportunities were altogether wanting which might have led to her hearing one or two of the chance mentions of dear familiar things which she longed for. Gilbert Neale was frequently at his mother's house. He often came there straight from Connington. He would sometimes, in Elsie's presence, go on talking for an hour together of places he had visited, and people he had seen, yet during several months he never once happened to bring in one of the words Elsie thirsted to hear. She chid herself for going to her grandmother's house whenever she knew that her uncle was there, with such a foolish fluttering of hope in her heart, and for coming back when the evening was over, so weary with disappointment. What could it signify to her? If even *his* name had come into the talk, if even she had heard that he was coming back to England, what right would she have had to be interested in the news?

When she had suffered a great many disappointments, she began to tell herself she was cured of ever expecting anything

to happen again. She believed she had come to the conclusion, that it was best not to have remembrance stirred by hearing the names of people with whom she should never have any further connexion, who had quite passed out of her life. She tried to resolve that she would not even wish to hear, that for the future she would be thankful, not sorry, when an evening in her uncle's society passed over safely without any little word being spoken to disturb her tranquillity.

She said all this very emphatically to herself one sunny April morning, as she sat in her usual place at the desk in the Museum Library, assiduously copying a picture from an old illuminated book.

She had begun her drawing two days before, when she had had the prospect before her of seeing her uncle soon. She had spent the previous evening with him at her grandmother's house, and to-day he was on his way back to Connington. Oh, how foolish she had been two days ago to be in such a state of agitation at the thought of what she might possibly hear from him, that her hand had trembled in tracing those curves! How foolish! How foolish! Well, the opportunity had passed. He would certainly not come again for three months at least. Fortunately she could acknowledge it was much better for her that the anticipated evening had proved a complete blank; that he who could have told her so many things she would have liked to hear, had talked for hours and said nothing, absolutely not one word. Yes, it was better for her not to have her peace disturbed. Was it peace, or was it death, famine, starvation? He might have given her a little taste of life-restoring food! He must often have walked down the dear streets, and seen the names written over the shops, and been stopped by acquaintances, and heard words spoken that she would have been so thankful to him for repeating ever so indifferently.

Elsie pushed the missal from which she was copying hastily aside; the illumination was in greater danger now than when her hand had trembled. A treacherous tear had nearly fallen and blistered the priceless page. What could it be that made the longing for Oldbury streets and faces come so strongly over her just at that moment?

Such a flood of recollections rose that she could almost fancy she had been spirited away in a moment to Oldbury, and that she was standing on the door-step of Elderberry's little house, with the scent of the lavender bushes in the Rectory garden blowing full in her face.

She put her hand over her eyes to press back the tears that obscured her vision, and then looked round to convince herself of where she really was.

The entrance-door to the Library, which was close to Elsie's seat, had opened a moment ago, and a party of visitors, under charge of one of the curators of the Museum, had come inside to look at the reading-room, and were whispering in what were meant to be low tones quite within Elsie's hearing.

A broad, good-humoured, rosy face, with a flutter of gorgeous ribbons round it, caught her eyes. She must be dreaming still; or had she been asleep for years, and just awakened in the middle of a Sunday morning at Oldbury Church, with Mrs. Adams in her best bonnet seated in the pew opposite? Yes, it was a whiff of Oldbury rose leaves and lavender that had come to her. The stout lady moved aside, and Elsie caught a glimpse of a certain white knitted woollen shawl (oh, how well she knew every leaf of the pattern on it!) which had always had a faint perfume of lavender and rose leaves hanging round it since Elsie could remember anything.

The quaint little elderly figure round which it was folded came in sight next. There was no room for doubt, and, awake or asleep, Elsie could sit still no longer. She rushed to the door just as, in despair at the talkativeness of the party he was escorting, the gentleman who had brought them in swung it wide open to let them out; and she had presence of mind enough not to throw her arms round Miss Berry's neck till they were safe outside the hall of silence, in a passage where there were only a few passers-by and the umbrella keepers to be scandalized at the exclamations and hand shakes and breathless questions and answers that followed.

Good-natured Mrs. Adams was almost as vehement in her expressions of delight at their unexpected meeting, as Miss Berry; and from her Elsie at last heard a coherent explanation of the circumstances that had led to their being at the Museum that day.

She told Elsie that she had come up to London to be present at the marriage of one of her grand-daughters, and had persuaded Miss Berry to accompany her to her daughter's house, and pay her a long-talked-of visit. They had already been three weeks in town, but this was the first day they had been able to give to sight-seeing. Miss Berry had had some business to attend to, some one to visit whose address she had to seek out, and much time had been taken up in the search; then

there had been the wedding. But this one leisure day had come at last, and it was Miss Berry who had decided on spending it in visiting the British Museum.

"My dear," struck in Miss Berry, squeezing Elsie's hands, which she still held tightly, "I thought only of my map, and of seeing the likeness of Joseph's Pharaoh, in whom, as you know, I always have taken such a particular interest; and to think of his having led me to you!"

When the excitement of the first few minutes was over, Mrs. Adams had the consideration to draw off the attention of the rest of the party so as to leave Elsie and her dear old friend to themselves. They walked up and down the lower Egyptian Hall, among the black sarcophagi, and wandered into cool, damp-smelling galleries, where ancient Babylonians stab each other endlessly on the walls, and talked, feeling as if they could never say all they had in their hearts, or look at each other enough. It seemed at the time to Elsie the most unreal of all the day dreams she had dreamed in that place: Oldbury news, mixed with exclamations from Miss Berry respecting the wonders she could not keep her eyes from wandering towards sometimes; the old dear, rambling, affectionate, familiar talk that Elsie had so thirsted after, and never thought to have heard again.

"O Elderberry, if you knew what it is to me to see you again!" was about as much as Elsie could find voice to say for some time; and even when she felt collected enough to ask questions, she found that her queries rather hindered than expedited the communications of which she was so greedy, and that it would be safest to let Miss Berry bring out her news in her own way, and keep the curiously interwoven sentences in her mind, to be unravelled at her leisure afterwards.

"Was it, could it be me you came to London to look for?" Elsie asked eagerly, when Miss Berry was mysteriously hinting at some secret mission which, far more than any wish to attend Miss Adams' wedding, had induced her to undertake such a long journey at her age.

An expression of perplexity crossed Miss Berry's beamingly happy face.

"My love, I think, if you please, we will walk on a little faster and get into another department, where perhaps I shall be better able to collect my thoughts. I confess it confuses me a good deal to have all the Pharaohs, and so many other Scripture characters as I am told there are in this room, staring

down into my face. I cannot help pausing in what I am saying to think how I can best introduce them into the map, with that tiger-headed woman to serve as an example of a monstrous idol. Well, now that we are come among the Babylonians, with whom I have never felt I had quite so much to do, I shall be able to give more undivided attention; and, my love, though your question embarrasses me a little, I will be perfectly frank with you. I did, I confess it, my dear, that last evening when he came back to Oldbury for nothing in the world but to talk to me about you—and, poor fellow, the state of mind he was in—I did make him a kind of promise, and it troubles my conscience very much sometimes to think that I have never once in all these months written to China, or taken any decided steps to get the news of you he was so anxious for. He must think me very ungrateful, for I have received the kindest letters from him and presents—a magnificent China crape shawl, which I have left in my will to you, Elsie :—to that length I think I may safely go in encouraging the attachment. And now that you have been thrown in my way in such a providential, unsought manner, in a place too, that, what with the tombs and the Scripture characters, may be almost said to rank with a church, I shall certainly feel justified in writing him a little letter, and just mentioning casually that I have seen you. I do not suppose I should have been quite so scrupulous hitherto, if such awful instances of disobedience to parents with respect to matrimony had not occurred in Oldbury. You do not mean to say that you have not heard? Then you may well be surprised at seeing me here. It was not for your sake, to tell you the truth, my dear, that I undertook a journey at my time of life; it was to look after those unhappy young people, Richard and Sophia Lutridge, who have brought such trouble on their parents and such disgrace on all Oldbury. If dearest Mrs. Lutridge could have risen from her sofa—but she cannot—she would positively have gone down on her knees to thank me when I ventured to suggest that, as I was nobody of any consequence, and had no character for consistency to keep up, I might come to London and find her poor children out, and make the first overtures to reconciliation. That the eldest son and daughter of such a family should make runaway matches within two months of each other—you can conceive the thrill of feeling that went through Oldbury when the news came out. I grieve to say that there were found some, even among the district visitors, cruel enough to insinuate that if

dearest Mrs. Lutridge had meddled less in her neighbours' concerns, and made her home a little pleasanter to her own family, the scandal might never have occurred. It was a heartless remark, my dear, and I never shall again be able to feel quite cordially to the Tomkinsons. Such a time to turn round on an old benefactress too! for, independently of these unlucky marriages, things are not with the Lutridges by any means as they used to be. It seems that, owing to some carelessness of Mr. Richard's, affairs at the bank began to go wrong. There were difficulties. Some people who have lost money complain a good deal, and the dear Lutridges themselves have been obliged to give up Laurel Lodge and come down into the town to live."

"That must have been a great trial to Mrs. Lutridge," said Elsie, a little blankly, for she could not help being disappointed at the turn the conversation had taken.

"She bore up very well till the story of Mr. Richard's marriage with the daughter of the man who keeps the little public-house at the bottom of the hill came out. You may remember her, my dear—a large young woman, with a red face and a quantity of shining black ringlets, as unlike you as it is possible to conceive, and at least fifteen years older than Mr. Richard. Mr. Lutridge was disposed to be lenient, in spite of all the trouble and disgrace his son's carelessness (and I fear worse than carelessness) had brought upon him; but Mrs. Lutridge thought she owed it to Oldbury to let her displeasure be shown plainly. When she heard that the marriage had taken place clandestinely at a church in Bristol, months before the parents on either side knew of it, and that two of her daughters had long been aware of what was going on, and had connived at their brother's misconduct, she was so indignant that she declared she would never see her son again, or forgive her daughters for their share in his ruin. Poor girls! they used to come to me and cry a great deal, and talk of their having always been so afraid of their mother, and of the discomfort and disunion at home, which they said had driven them all to underhand ways. It ended in poor Miss Sophia's running away with one of the bank clerks who had been turned off for unsteadiness a year before, and in Miss Ursula's resolving to go over to the Church of Rome, and drawing young Walter Neale, who is a weak youth I am afraid, my dear, into a secret correspondence on the subject. It seems they proposed to escape to France together, and there to take monastic vows; but, as I understand

now, they have changed their minds, and are content to form a marriage engagement instead. It strikes me that this is the simpler and less objectionable arrangement of the two; but it has met with much opposition from Walter Neale's friends. I have heard that his mother still refuses her consent, and that Mr. Lutridge is quite bowed down with shame at the want of right feeling and sense of propriety his poor daughter has shown in her conduct throughout the whole affair. Some people say that Mrs. Lutridge does not feel it nearly so much as he does; but, my dear, I leave you to judge: she has never been outside her house for a whole year! Oldbury is a changed place in consequence. The way in which the servant girls stand talking and laughing at the area gates of an evening now, and the style of bonnets they go to church in, are proof enough that she is no longer the person she used to be. People speak their minds and arrange things in an off-hand way that is quite startling. One hardly seems to know now what sides people are on, or who ought and who ought not to be visited. Mr. Pierrepont and the incumbent of the district church walk about together arm in arm. Little innovations (of a very pleasing sort, I must confess) are actually creeping into our service at the old church: there is a talk of our having 'Hymns, Ancient and Modern,' when the old Hymn Books are worn out; yet Mrs. Lutridge takes it all quietly, and does not offer an opinion. She seems to have lost heart to interfere about anything now. If the Pope himself were to come and attempt to preach in Oldbury I really don't think it would stir her up. When I consulted her about my journey to London, and suggested that I would, if she pleased, trace out poor Sophia, and ascertain whether the rumour we had heard about her husband's actually ill-using her was well founded or not, and call on Mr. and Mrs. Richard, and bring her news of their baby—instead of being angry with me, and ordering me out of the house, as I quite expected she would, she broke down, sobbing, my dear,—only think of that, Mrs. Lutridge!—and when she had recovered herself a little, she spoke of my faithful friendship and kindly influence over every one, in terms really as if she had taken it into her head that there had been some mistake, and that it was I, and not she herself, who had been doing good in Oldbury all these years. It was a distressing scene, indeed. Dearest Mrs. Lutridge almost, one may say, humbling herself to me! You will not wonder, I am sure, that, with such heart-breaking warnings before my eyes, I have been scrupulous and doubtful about the wisdom of keeping up in

Stephen Pierrepont's mind certain hopes and fears. I see what a brilliant colour has come into your face, my love, and I know that I am approaching a delicate subject. If I had not been taken so unawares I would have thought it over, and made up my mind how much I should be justified in repeating of what he said to me the last day he was in England, when he read your little note, and was completely overcome at the thought of going so far away without prospect of hearing of you again. Poor fellow ! I always knew what a great amount of deep feeling there was hidden under that playful manner of his, which, in spite of one's dread of levity, one could not help finding very winning. He was always making a joke of me and saying perplexing things, and yet, my dear, you would hardly believe how much older I feel since he left England ; and how I miss all the kindnesses he was always showing me, and the sight of his pleasant face coming into my room. However, as I have not had time to consider what I ought to say, and feeling bewildered, as I do, with so many Pharaohs and Sennacheribs standing round, I think it will be more conscientious of us to change the subject. Let us speak of something else. Ah ! there are Mrs. Adams and the others coming to look for us. I fear we have been keeping them waiting an immense time. And that wonderfully clever gentleman, who told us all about the world before it was created, must be getting impatient for us to go. I will give you one kiss before they all come up. Yes, I love you as much as ever, my dear Elsie ; and I understand what your eyes are asking me, though you speak in such a low whisper that I cannot quite catch the words. I will write to China to-night, and I promise to post the letter before I have time to think it over and get frightened. He has begged me over and over again to write, even if I have nothing to say about you ; and now I think I shall be justified in sending a letter and putting in some allusion (not too explicit perhaps) to what has happened to-day. It will be a difficult task ; but I trust I shall be enabled to express myself judiciously, and avoid saying more than I ought. Unfortunately we go back to Oldbury to-morrow morning, and I have promised to spend the last evening with the poor Richard Lutridges at Camden Town, so I am afraid this must be good-bye. Mrs. Adams is beckoning quite impatiently, you see."

Elsie followed her friends to the outer door and took an affectionate leave of Mrs. Adams, whose daughter, as kind-hearted and rosy-faced as herself, gladdened Elsie's heart by

asking for her address, and promising to call on her sometimes, and let her know how the two elder ladies settled down in Oldbury after the excitement of their London visit.

She did not re-enter the building till the last flutter of Mrs. Adams' floating bonnet-strings was lost in the crowd outside, and then she discovered how late it was, and that she must hasten back to her grandfather, from whom she had never before been so long absent. Fortunately he had been happily occupied, and had not missed her. He did not ask her any questions when she came back, or appear to notice anything unusual in her countenance as they were walking home together. The event of the last hour and a half, which had somehow or other made all the world look different to Elsie, would have no interest whatever for him. She did not think it necessary to attempt to talk to him about it.

Margaret was more observing. When she returned home late in the evening after a hard day's work, she saw that something had happened almost the moment she opened the door of their dull little lodging-house drawing-room. Elsie was seated at the open window with her hands resting idly on her lap, looking over the leafless lilac bushes in the dusty square garden towards an opening in the opposite row of houses, which showed a patch of sky and a silvery crescent moon, just then faintly marked in the pale blue. Her restful attitude struck Margaret almost as much as the happy, dreamy smile on her face. It almost startled her. It spoke of a mood very, very far removed from anything she herself had experienced for many a year; yet she understood what it meant very well. She knew that Elsie did not see the dusty lilac bushes, or even the shining silver boat sailing in that narrow river of London sky. She had taken some treasured remembrance out of her mind, and was looking only at that. She was conning over some words, or bringing back some looks, weighing them and appraising them as if they were jewels, and smiling to herself to discover how rich beyond her previous reckoning she was. It must be something she had heard lately, for Margaret had never seen her look like this before. She went up to her softly and laid her hand on her shoulder. "Well?" she could not help saying in a tone of inquiry, as she looked down into Elsie's changed face.

"O Aunt Margaret, what do you think has happened to-day?" Elsie began eagerly.

Margaret's face expressed a little surprise and disappointment, perhaps, as Elsie's narrative went on; she had evidently expected

to hear something of more importance, and indeed, as Elsie related the incident of the afternoon, it hardly sounded a sufficient reason for feeling so radiantly happy. After all, what had happened? She had, by the merest chance in the world, encountered an old friend who would probably never come across her path again; and that was all. Elsie's joy was somewhat checked by Margaret's matter-of-fact way of listening to the news she had to impart. She began to think the meeting, which had seemed little short of a miracle, almost commonplace and natural, as Margaret calmly commented on it; and Miss Berry's words hardly seemed worth such endless pondering over as she had been disposed to accord them a few minutes before. But the glamour that the daylight of Margaret's reason dissipated, returned again the very first time Elsie was alone, and could translate the story back into her own heart's language. Miss Berry's words turned into priceless pearls and diamonds once more, and with them in endless variation she embellished all the sultry days of the summer that followed, and wove garlands, and made lamps of them to lighten the gloom of a dreary autumn, till a certain day in the winter came and brought fresh emotion with it.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

MISS BERRY'S LETTER.

A WIDE low room spread with matting, but in other respects furnished like an English drawing-room, and littered with music, work, and sketches in a fashion that spoke of a lady's constant occupation of it. A large window opening on to a shaded balcony filled with flower-pots, where a few roses and geraniums and a clump of English daisies drooped in the heat; and from which, now that the curtains of the awning were drawn aside, a glimpse of the sea blazing in sunlight, of a squadron of English and French men-of-war in the distance, and of strange sailed, strange hued Chinese junks gliding past, could be gained by the occupants of the room. These were just now only two, who had lately deserted the shadier parts of the room for the window recess. Cecil Russel stood a little way out on the balcony braving the glare and the inquisitive glances of some almond-shaped black eyes from the streets below (to say nothing of unsavoury whiffs from the same locality which entirely overpowered the faint perfume of the flowers and tainted the fresh sea-breeze), while she stooped down and picked off some faded leaves from her plants, and touched with her finger the burned-up earth round the roots of her melancholy looking withered Oldbury daisy.

Stephen Pierrepont, who had risen from a table laden with books and papers a minute or two before, and come to the window for no apparent purpose but to see what she was doing, stood leaning against the window-sill, alternately watching her and spelling out a sentence in a Chinese book he held open in his hand.

They both looked a great deal older than when Oldbury knew

them—older than the additional three years that had passed over their heads at all warranted—till they spoke, and then each face regained something of the playful animation and openness of expression that had given it its peculiarly youthful look a few years before.

They had been talking and laughing eagerly over some incident of a few minutes ago, almost in their old openly familiar brother and sister fashion—almost, but not quite. They had never been quite as intimate since they left England as they used to be in the old days before they spent a summer together in Oldbury, though Cecil was perhaps the only one who was conscious of the slight barrier of reserve that had grown up between them. They stood now close together, quite at ease in not talking, and only let fall a sentence now and then as they pleased. When Cecil had finished watering her flowers, she remained on the balcony with her hands clasped behind her, looking out dreamily towards the sea. A somewhat weary, anxious expression grew into her face as she gazed; and it was with a quick sigh and an impatient gesture, as if she were struggling to shake off a weight, that she turned towards the room and took up the desultory conversation again.

“What an odd feeling it gives one to look out upon the sea for long together! The motion of the waves has a strange sort of power over one. I feel as if I were gradually slipping out of my body as I look, and floating away just over the tops of the waves—not exactly touching them, but borne along by their rocking. If I went on staring long enough, I do believe I should go. I should get to England that way, or somewhere.”

“That sort of feeling was what the Greeks meant by their stories about the sirens, I suppose,” said Steenie carelessly. “Have a little bit of prosaic practical Confucian philosophy to put your body and soul into comfortable relations again. I’m reading from one of the most approved Chinese books of instruction. Here is what serves a follower of Confucius for spiritual nourishment. The subject of the treatise is duty to parents; and there are examples recorded for general imitation; it is a sort of sacred history in fact, handed down for all generations to ponder over. You shall hear a sentence or two: ‘In the Chang dynasty, Sin Li, when fifty years of age, still resided with his parents, and was subject to their will. To prevent them from considering themselves old he affected the manners of a child, and sported and gambolled before them in gaily coloured garments. He would pretend to stumble in walking like a babe.

All this he did to divert his aged parents. In the Tsin dynasty, Mang Tsung mourned the death of his father. During the winter season his mother desired bamboo sprouts made into soup. He went into the forest, and, grasping a bamboo with his hands, burst into tears. Such filial devotion moved heaven and earth; and in a little while the earth opened and sent forth several bamboo sprouts.' This is said to be the original cause of bamboos sprouting in the winter as well as in the spring, by the way."

"Well, but that is a little less prosaic than I expected. It is a miracle."

"No, a thoroughly unspiritual marvel; that is to say, the most prosaic, degrading subject of belief in the world—akin to Cagliostro tricks and table-rapping—the thing that is sure to result from a creed which starts by disowning every attempt to get beyond the region of the senses."

"Well, but I don't mean to let myself be entangled in a discussion on Chinese religious systems just now. If we must talk metaphysics, explain to me how it is that I have found myself forced to think so much of Oldbury this afternoon without any particular reason, for really we all have present anxieties enough just now to fill our thoughts."

"I can explain that without metaphysics; it is nothing more than the scent of the Tonguin beans in the little box you brought down in your hand to-day that has carried your thoughts off in that direction. Don't you remember you had it—the box—with you in Oldbury that summer? and one day when you happened to say you liked the smell of Tonguin beans, Miss Berry took some from her work-box and gave them to you. If you lift up the lid of the left hand division, you will see I am right."

"The idea of your remembering all that! I had forgotten the very existence of this box till I turned it out this morning from the packing case where it was stowed the last time there was a talk of the rebels taking Shanghai, and Papa sent me on shipboard. I don't believe the lid of this division has ever been lifted since that day when—yes, it was Elsie Blake who shut the beans in. They feel quite at home, I should think, in this hot sunshine. Will you have one?"

"No; what should I do with it? Shut them up for another three years. Shall I read you some more?"

"No, no, I am not in the humour for it, and I wish you would not pretend to be. Nothing in the world bores me so much as

listening to a person talking of what he is not thinking of, and you are always doing that to me now."

"I know something that would bore you still more—to listen to a person talking of what he was thinking of on post days. You would get very tired. I flatter myself I am not quite such an intolerable bore to you as I *could* be."

"Oh! is the mail in? I actually had forgotten to expect it. My principal correspondents are growing lazy, and seldom send me any interesting news. I don't reckon on post days as I used to do, though, of course, one is always glad of anything from home."

Cecil turned to the window and looked out towards the sea again for some time in silence.

"It would all be less dreary if it were more thoroughly unlike what one is used to," she said, turning a dissatisfied glance back into the room at last. "I wish we Europeans did not all huddle together, and make such desperate attempts to do exactly as we have been doing all our lives. If I could have turned myself into a Chinese lady for these three years, and lived among the natives, I should at all events have got some new ideas, and seen what would have served me to think about for the rest of my life. As it is, I have seen nothing that does not look like England, but a few dirty streets and shops, and a little strange vegetation. When we have a party of English residents here, and the ladies are talking together, I could shut my eyes and fancy myself in Oldbury. We may have changed our skies, but we certainly have not changed our minds by coming all this long way."

"Comfort yourself with the probability that some day or other the rebels will swoop down on Shanghai and carry us all off prisoners into the interior. We shall, no doubt, get a very satisfactory insight into the mysteries of Chinese life by being carried about the streets of Pekin in wooden cages; and if we survive the process, we shall have plenty to talk about for the rest of our lives."

"You have lost your chance of such promotion by volunteering to go up the country with Lord Elgin and the army, leaving us behind to take care of ourselves."

"Yes, but I get something better than the bare possibility of seeing the inside of a Chinese wooden cage; for I suppose there is no doubt there will be some more fighting before we have done with it. We shall all be too busy for lounging and translating Chinese saws soon, I hope."

"I know there is no use hoping for a word from Papa or you

after the mail is in, but you will see that I have my letters soon, won't you?" Cecil said, coming out of the balcony and preparing to leave the room.

Stephen followed her to the door, and stopped her just as she was opening it.

"Cecil, you shan't have to say again that I never talk to you of what I am thinking about. There is no use asking, for I am sure you would have told me if there had been anything to tell, but you never have had any answers to your letters to Miss Berry, have you?"

"No," answered Cecil sorrowfully; "and it puzzles me dreadfully how to account for her obstinate silence. You are as much at a loss, I suppose; for though your father writes you such long letters, he contrives, man-like, never to tell anything in them."

"No, I am not at a loss; I think I understand perfectly well why she does not write; I have made up my mind about it. She knows something she cannot bear to tell me, and is silent for fear of letting it out. That would be just like her. She would be sure to write if she had nothing to say."

"What sort of thing do you mean?"

"Nay, that is just what I am continually changing my mind about. I don't often think *she* is dead; Miss Berry would have told me that, whatever pain it cost her to write it. I expect she is married, and has written to tell Miss Berry so. It is three years since they left Oldbury. Why should she not be married?"

"You need not look so fiercely at me, I am not going to urge any reasons why she should not; only I think it is rather a gratuitous supposition on your part. You know all the difficulties and objections. Why should another person have found it easier to get her than you?"

"I was hampered; besides, her father is dead. That might make a difference in their way of life. I showed you the announcement of Mr. Le Fevre's death in a newspaper that came from England some time ago, and you were struck with the peculiar way in which it was worded."

"Yes, I liked the 'died penitent.' I am sure Margaret Blake drew up the paragraph, and that it was not her doing there was ever any mystification or concealment. I wish you could have gone back to England."

"But I cannot. It would be absolute disgrace to leave the country in the position of affairs now."

"And Papa could not possibly spare you; he is overworked as it is, and he is always saying you are the only person about him who gives the kind of help he most wants. He seems to think that he might have been obliged to go to the north himself if he could not have sent you, and if you had not known as much of the language and the ways of the country as you do. You can't think how thankful I am that he is spared the fatigue and the danger."

"I am not sanguine that there is likely to be any danger to speak of; but at all events the chance of coming in for anything of the kind instead of him, makes up for a great deal. Not that I have any particular wish to get back to England now; I am convinced it would be a useless journey, and that I am better here."

"Well, then, we will all stay till we have been paraded about in cages, and have adventures to tell that will make lions and lionesses of us for the rest of our lives. Let me go now; there is a large party coming to dinner, and I have some orders to give."

The next two days were unusually busy ones with the consul and his secretaries. Cecil saw but little of her father, and was not able to have a word with her cousin till late in the evening of the third day after their conversation, when he came into her sitting-room with an open letter in his hand.

"I hope you were satisfied with your budget?" he began.

"I had a number of letters. People are beginning to be anxious about us in England; all my interfering friends and relations are storming at Papa for not sending me home. I have had to tell him flatly that I won't go. What were your letters?"

"Two from Oldbury—one from my father, and one, a long one, from Miss Berry."

"At last! Well?"

"Cecil, I was right. Take the letter and read it. It is even more disjointed and exclamatory than Elderberry's productions used formerly to be; but you will make out what she wants to tell me. It was startling news at first, but now I think I am beginning to understand it better."

Cecil took the closely written sheets to the light, and stood frowning over the difficulty of making out the cramped handwriting. Soon there was an exclamation of amazement, and as she turned the pages backwards and forwards to refer to previous sentences, the expression of perplexity deepened on her face.

"What can she mean by saying so much at the beginning of her letter about disappointment, and about people marrying differently from what one would expect when one thinks of their first loves? Then comes all this long story about the clandestine marriages of Richard and Sophia Lutridge, which she says prevented her answering our letters, and at the end she speaks of going to London and seeing Elsie Blake. One does not see the connexion of the ideas. One guesses, from the beginning of the letter, that she found Elsie married, but she does not say so."

"As clearly as she says anything else. You have overlooked a sentence at the end, where she says she little thought, when we were all together that summer in Oldbury, that one of the Lutridges would be preferred to one of us."

"Do you know (it is very obscurely expressed)—but I am inclined to think that sentence refers to me? Walter Neale is engaged to Ursula Lutridge. Can she be thinking of any gossip she may have heard about him and me long ago?"

"No, no. Allowing for Elderberry's style of narrative, it is clear enough what she means. Richard Lutridge has married, it seems, without the consent of his friends. They disowned him, and lost sight of him for a year or so. Miss Berry goes to London with overtures of reconciliation, not knowing exactly where to find him, and unexpectedly falls in with Elsie—his wife—at the British Museum, as she describes. You see, she says she spent the evening with them—with Mr. and Mrs. Richard Lutridge—and that she has asked them to go and stay with her in Oldbury. He was a great fool certainly; but he was fond of her. I can understand how it has come about."

"I can't. Elsie Blake married to Richard Lutridge! It seems utterly impossible. They must have been married some time, too; for don't you see at the end there is something about a baby, and their living in lodgings and being very poor?"

"Well, never mind; give me the letter back. It's not a very lucid production; but we have wrung all to the very dregs of the bitter truth out of it. We need not discuss it any farther."

Cecil folded the sheets slowly and put them back into their envelope. "I wish I understood why Miss Berry did not write at once," she said reflectively.

"She tells us it was because the Lutridges were concerned in the affair. I suppose till just now they were anxious that Richard's marriage should be as little known as possible. After

all Mrs. Lutridge used to say against the Blakes, her son's marriage may well be a bitter pill for her to swallow."

"But that Elsie should marry him clandestinely—such a man—Steenie, I can't bear to think it. It alters my thought of her—it degrades her."

"No, don't say that. I've been thinking it over and over since that letter came, and it does not lower *her*. If there has been any mistake, any wrong in her conduct, I am to blame for it. She has felt that I deserted her, that I shrank from sharing the family disgrace with her, and his conduct has stood out in favourable contrast to mine. It has looked like generosity, and that is just what would move her."

"But you did not desert her?"

"No, but it may very well have seemed to her that I did. A person with fewer scruples and more opportunities of seeing her might easily make her believe he was willing to risk more for her than I was. I hope that horrible old woman down at Oldbury won't have much to do with her. Unless Dick Lutridge is very much changed, he won't be able to protect her against his mother. How will my father behave to her when she goes to stay with Miss Berry? I wish I had known in time to write to him about it."

"Steenie, how can you bear to talk as if it were certain?"

"It is certain. I tried to disbelieve it yesterday, but to-day I can't. You will not be doing me any kindness by talking me into doubt again. It is at all events a good thing for me just now to know that there is nothing to make me in a hurry to get back home. I am more glad than ever that Lord Elgin has consented to take me up the country with him, and that we shall be moving soon."

Cecil thought a great deal about Miss Berry's letter, and would have liked to have read it a second time; but she could not make up her mind to ask her cousin for it again. He was to leave Shanghai soon; and though his time was very much occupied with business, he contrived to join Cecil in her early and late drives, and to spare quarters of an hour for chat with her more frequently than he had done hitherto. They talked a great deal about Oldbury, and Stephen was now always the first to bring up recollections of past times, and make allusions to events and places connected with Elsie Blake which he had studiously avoided formerly. Cecil could not quite make it out. She thought he was trying to harden himself, and force the scenes that had hitherto had such a

halo over them to look commonplace, by talking of them indifferently.

"Why should I have any objection to speak of Mrs. Richard Lutridge?" he said once, when she made an effort to turn the conversation. "It is time I got accustomed to it. She has been married a year and a half by this time, and has outlived sentimental recollections long ago, you may be sure. It is quite time I did."

It was clear to Cecil that, whatever he might say, the thought of having been supplanted by such a rival as Richard Lutridge was a very deep wound to pride as well as to affection. Sometimes, however, he would talk about Elsie in a strain Cecil liked better. He would discuss anxiously the probability of her being happy under her new circumstances, and recall little traits of kindness or good feeling displayed by Richard Lutridge in his school or college days, which made it less improbable that he would prove a competent guardian of Elsie's welfare than Cecil was disposed to believe.

Stephen insisted on the impossibility of any one having Elsie's constant companionship without being improved by it. Cecil privately thought that Elsie was the sort of woman who, if she married beneath her, must inevitably sink to the level of her husband. She did not say so, but her demurs led to discussions that were apt to lengthen out and occupy the whole evening. It required all Cecil's tact to follow the changes in Stephen's mood during one such conversation: the alternations between dislike and contempt of Richard Lutridge, and anxiety to think well of him for Elsie's sake; the rapid transitions from a condition of hurt pride towards Elsie herself to a relapse into tenderness.

The barrier of reserve that had existed more or less between the cousins for nearly three years had disappeared all at once. Cecil felt as if she had slipped back some years in her life, and got into the middle of what she called the Oldbury summer again.

It was a busy, exciting time. Talk of impending war and danger, and busy preparations for the departure of the allied forces northwards, were going on round her, but she scarcely heeded it, the change in her own inner life was so absorbing.

Sometimes she felt very happy, and found herself tripping up and down stairs, or sitting idle, with her hands before her, in a sort of dreamy, hazy, brightness of mood, that she thought she had definitely cut herself off from years ago. At other

times she was restless and dissatisfied with herself. She felt as if she were letting herself be gradually drawn towards something, which she would not look at or recognize because she did not wish to be convinced she ought to avoid it.

One day, about a week before Steenie was to leave them, her father stopped her on the stairs when she was flashing past him in one of her gay moods, and surprised her by an unusually warm approving kiss on her forehead.

"My darling, I am glad to see you in such good spirits; you set an example of public spirit to us all. I was afraid you would make yourself anxious about Stephen's leaving us to go with Lord Elgin, instead of taking a sensible view of the matter, and entering into his satisfaction at being employed on such an important service."

"I am so thankful that you have not taken it into your head to insist on going too!" Cecil said, hastily returning his kiss.

It was quite a true saying, but Cecil was not exactly content with it when she was alone, and came to think it over. Her father's praise forced on her the self-examination she had been avoiding for the last three weeks, and the discoveries to which it led startled her.

Steenie was going away, probably for a long period, to be exposed to considerable risk and danger; and somehow she felt more as if he had just returned to her after a long absence, than as if she were preparing to wish him good-bye.

The habit he had resumed of coming to talk to her about everything, just as he used to do in their school-boy and school-girl days, and more, some tones of voice, and words spoken lately which were not quite like the old days, made her feel as if they should be much nearer together a thousand miles apart now, than they had been, living in the same house during the last three years. She had suffered a good deal from the sort of half separation that had grown up between them, even while she had said emphatically to herself, that it was quite natural, and nothing more than what every sister has to go through when a very dearly loved brother, in the inevitable course of things, takes some one else into the first place in his heart, and has thoughts and interests she cannot share. It seemed now as if her brother was coming back to her again, all the more ready to value her sympathy and companionship because he had been disappointed in what he had tried to put in its place.

Cecil walked up and down the room, quite forgetting what she had come upstairs for, while she tried to persuade herself

that there was no harm and no danger here, nothing at all derogatory to her own dignity or injurious towards Elsie in the strong sense of happiness which this return to old ways had brought to her.

But she was too honest and too discerning to succeed in her effort at self-deception. After a little while she left off walking up and down the room, and covered her face with her hands to look down into her heart more closely yet. Recollections of the thoughts and feelings of the Oldbury summer crowded into her mind. She remembered the pain she had felt when she stood on the bridge over the Idle one gloomy day, and how she had resolved to do what lay in her power to help Elsie and Steenie to remain true to each other. She thought of a warning her father had once given her not to let herself be drawn into accepting a poor pretence of a love, founded on mere chances of companionship. A love founded on wounded pride and impatience of disappointment would be a far worse pretence, even if it were the dearest, dearest companion, the one person who pleased her best in the world, round whom all the pleasantest recollections and brightest thoughts of her life would always cling, who offered it to her. It would be unworthy of him to offer it. She must not take it; must not let him, from the mere impatience of pain, try to console himself in such a false way. If Elsie had failed him ever so unworthily, it would still be a mistake to try to drive out her image by putting another hastily in its place. And, besides, was it quite certain that she had failed? Had there not been some impatience and want of faith in her, shown in their acceptance of the worst interpretation that could be put on Miss Berry's puzzling letter? The doubt came like a flash of enlightenment into Cecil's mind, and the half-remembered, confused words of the letter began to arrange themselves in her memory with quite different meanings from what she had seen in them before. At all events, it would be a wise test to take to try her own feelings and Steenie's words by, that she should not allow herself to feel, or suffer him to say anything, the recollection of which would spoil their satisfaction if they found out that there had been a mistake, and that Elsie was still free. Cecil's thoughts grew calm after she had made this resolution. She remembered she had come upstairs to look for something for her father, found what she wanted, and went down and sat attentively working by his side all the rest of the morning.

She was somewhat sober-minded, and her father did not

compliment her on her spirits again during the rest of the week ; but she did not make any attempt to keep out of her cousin's way, or cut short any of the long conversations they fell into when they were together. He had many hints to give her about ways in which she might, to a certain extent, supply his place to her father while he was away. She could not help being grateful for the careful arrangements he made to save her perplexity, and for the care he took to anticipate the work as far as possible, that she might have little to do on the first few days of his absence while it was new to her.

It was not in her nature not to express her gratitude very warmly now and then, and she felt a good deal of dismay sometimes at the thought of what the house would be to her when there would be no one in it to look after her interests and understand her wishes instinctively as Stephen, even when they were not so very openly intimate, had always had the power of doing.

The house had been very full of guests for a long time, but Stephen entreated that they might spend the last evening before they left Shaughai alone.

Sir Cecil had been ill all day from the heat and from overwork, and Cecil's anxiety about him occupied her thoughts almost to the exclusion of what was going to happen next day. In the course of the evening Sir Cecil was called away on business, and when he had left the room Stephen made Cecil come out with him on to the balcony to look at the moonlight on the water, and admire for the last time the French and English men-of-war steamers that were to begin their voyage northwards on the morrow. They spoke about Sir Cecil's health first, and discussed the possibility of his having to resign his appointment and sail for England before Lord Elgin's return from the north. It seemed very probable that after to-morrow's good-bye they might not meet again till they met in England.

"How many years hence, I wonder?" Steenie asked. "My uncle has been advising me to stay on here if he is unfortunately obliged to go home. He thinks his successor, whoever he may be, will be very glad of my services, and that it would be a pity for me to throw away my three years' experience of the work here, gained under him who understands this horrid country as no one else does."

"But it will be a very different thing for you working with a stranger. You would not like it," said Cecil. "You would

find it a great change coming back to this house with fresh people in it."

"I should think so. I shall have a great respect, and still more wonder at myself if I find I can bear it. I suspect, whoever my new chief proved to be, I should desert him, and rush home by the first mail after the war was over. Cecil, would it be worth my while to come home after you; or would you advise me to stay on here for another twelve years or so, climbing up step by step into notice as a useful public servant with a convenient knowledge of Chinese devices for cheating, till I got as sun-dried and pompous and red-tapey as C—— or D——, and could come home on a pension? It would be a nice life, would it not. And I should enjoy myself when I got back, and found I had outlived every one's knowledge."

"I think it would be possible to lead as satisfactory a life working here as anywhere else," said Cecil. "You know we have often talked about it, and settled what a great work there is for English officials to do in places like this, whose future depends so much on the way in which English influence acts."

"Yes, yes; but if I had not you to talk philosophy to me about it, what heart do you suppose I should have for anything beyond the necessary routine? No, I see exactly the log I should grow into if I stayed on long here alone."

"But if you really think it would be bad for you, don't stay."

"Coming back to England under some circumstances would be worse still, Cecil; I begin to think I have been a great fool, and made a thorough mess of my life—some people do that—stretching stupidly after an unattainable thing that was not meant for me, and passing over a prize that with proper effort I might possibly have won. Is it very unpardonable to be blind to what is best suited to one because it chances to be near?"

"I suppose it is always best to stretch out towards what seems to be the highest good, even if it is unattainable. The straining to make oneself worthy of it is the best for one."

"I did not say the unattainable prize was the highest; that turns out to be a stupid mistake I made. I am ashamed of boring you about myself this last night. How tired you would be of the subject if you had not an inexhaustible fund of goodness for me. I can't understand it—it is wonderful, after all my changes of temper and moodiness, that you have not given me up in disgust long ago. What should I do if you did? Cecil, after all there is nothing in the world so good as such a

friendship and such perfect confidence as we have always had together. People who have once learned to know each other through and through as we do, can't have misunderstandings, or slip away from each other, whatever circumstances they may be placed in afterwards. It is something solid to rest on; the best foundation, I am convinced, for the closest relationships. I begin to suspect that falling in love is all a mistake, and that the greatest happiness of life is to be found in such an affection as ours. Don't you think so?"

"It is a very good thing at all events," Cecil said confusedly. "But O Steenie, wait a minute" (for Stephen had come close to her and tried to take her hand), "I have got something to say to you. Let me have my turn to speak before you go on, please."

Steenie drew back, surprised at her vehemence, and she looked steadily in his face, though she felt the tears starting to her eyes, and found it was all she could do to keep her voice steady.

"You said just now something about its being the last night, and so much may happen—you may have to make up your mind on such important subjects before we meet again. You must not mind my asking you a question—saying something that has come into my mind about that letter of Miss Berry's you showed me three weeks ago."

"Say whatever you like," Stephen answered in a voice that had changed very much since he spoke last, and whose tones struck a chill through Cecil's heart.

"You must, please, not be vexed. You told me not to talk you into hope again; but, Steenie, do you know I think you are doing wrong. I think it is just impatience, and perhaps a little pride, that makes you determined to be so very sure. I know that after a long suspense, when a thing seems very hopeless, there is a sort of relief in thinking one has come to the worst, and can rightly make an effort to turn away and bury the old pain. There are times when one wants to do it very much, even when with the pain one has to bury a love that perhaps is not dead, or anything like dead, only benumbed or wounded. It is very dangerous to do such things in a hurry, for then the pain and the love may get up and be a greater torment than ever. There is no use in putting one feeling for another either, and calling it by a wrong name, to try to get consolation out of it. That never answers. I don't want to talk you into fresh hopes that might bring worse disappoint-

ment afterwards, but I do want you to be patient, and not to make up your mind about the meaning of that letter till we have made inquiries and learnt more precisely what has happened in England.

There was a long pause when Cecil ceased speaking. Instead of answering her, Steenie crossed his arms over the railing of the balcony, and stood with his back turned to the room, gazing out upon the sea, till Sir Cecil's step re-entering the room roused him. Then he started up, took Cecil's hand quickly, and pressed his lips on it.

"At all events I was right," he said in a quick low voice, "about our knowing each other through and through. You have read me better than I understood myself. I don't yet agree with you about there being any hope still; but I see now that it was impatience of pain, cowardice, if you like, that has made me try so hard to convince myself that it was all over. I understand you quite. Forgive me—I don't deserve that you should; but, at all events, I promise faithfully never to inflict my hopelessness on you again after the fashion of to-night, or presume to call our dear old friendship by a wrong name."

Sir Cecil called his daughter to come to him before she had time to answer, and she was not sorry to be excused from speaking again. She did not feel that she had been quite thoroughly understood, and she had felt a good deal of pain in hearing some of Steenie's words; but then she felt tolerably sure that no amount of talking would bring anything to lessen it.

Cecil was engaged with visitors the next day when the hour for Stephen's departure came. She heard him come out of her father's room, where he had been closeted in close conference the greater part of the morning, and ask for her. Then came his quick step running up the stairs; and Cecil, who had been giving somewhat short, irrelevant answers to her visitors' questions for the last five minutes, got up hastily and went to the drawing-room door to meet him. He looked very much disconcerted when he saw how the room was occupied.

"I have been religiously saving the last quarter of an hour for you. I have a great deal to say. Can't you send those people away?"

"Impossible? It is the C——s and the D——s, the most easily offended people in Shanghai. I should never hear the last of it."

"Well, then, I must resign myself to be troubled with the ghosts of uncomfortable thoughts all the time I am away, since

you refuse to lay them for me. Only one word I must have. You have forgiven me for last night; we are the same friends as ever; it is not to make the smallest difference?"

"Nothing ever could," Cecil said, holding out both her hands. "Now, good-bye! Mrs. C—— is wondering why we are whispering together, and thinking that such a long hand shake is not necessary, even when one is going to the wars, and does not know when one shall see one's friends again."

"I shall see you again before very long, for, if you leave, I shall follow to England as soon as possible. I have been reading over that letter, and things have grown wonderfully clearer to me since last night, and I think I see my way. Here are two letters I sat up nearly all night to write—one to my father, and one to Miss Berry. The answers to them must bring certainty of some sort; and meanwhile I have taken out a new lease of hope. You will see to their being posted, won't you? I leave them with you."

He was gone the next moment; but Cecil saw him turn round after he had left the house to wave another good-bye to her as she stood out on the balcony with her guests. She was glad to have that last bright, upward look to recall in a time of fearful suspense and anxiety that followed.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

NEWS.

THE younger Mrs. Adams did not forget the promise she had made to Elsie on the occasion of their chance meeting at the Museum, to call on her occasionally and bring her news of Miss Berry and of Oldbury. Whether it was curiosity, originally excited by the gossip about the Blakes she had been used to hear in Oldbury, or simple kindness of heart that drew the busy, self-important lady from her home at Clapton all the way to the sombre lodgings in Bloomsbury Street, where old Mr. Blake and Margaret had fixed their abode, mattered very little to Elsie. She had the satisfaction, not once only, but again and again during the ensuing summer, of seeing in their own sitting-room, a face that she had previously seen in Oldbury, of hearing familiar names—Oldbury names—spoken with an approach to adequate interest and circumstantiality; and of putting questions which her visitor could answer satisfactorily without drawing all the conclusions from her asking them that a native of Oldbury would undoubtedly have drawn.

Mrs. Adams had all the right of a born and bred Londoner, whose husband's relations lived in a country town, to smile at Oldbury peculiarities, and profess contempt for Oldbury gossip; but if Elsie's tender feelings were a little wounded sometimes by slighting remarks on old friends, there was compensation in the belief that her own history was not as constantly in her companion's mind as she would have known it must inevitably be if one of her old fellow-townswomen had been seated opposite to her. She could gratify herself by ascertaining that the mulberry tree in the Rectory garden had withstood the severe gales of the last winter, and even venture a timid question respecting

Mr. Pierrepont's health and spirits; and Mrs. Adams could answer indifferently without relaxing her stealthy watch from the window for the return of the hired brougham that had taken her daughter on to pay another visit while she sat with Elsie.

Such absorption in one's neighbours' concerns as comes naturally enough in Oldbury, is not easily reconciled with the necessity of getting over a great deal of ground, and crowding a number of visits into one afternoon, which regulates intercourse between acquaintances in London.

Still, there was a sufficient degree of interest aroused to prevent the intercourse languishing; and in the hot August days, when everybody was leaving London, Mrs. Adams and her daughter came together to tell Elsie that they were about to take their departure for Oldbury, where they were to spend the autumn, and to offer to convey any message or token of remembrance she might wish to send to her friend Miss Berry.

Elsie collected some of the prettiest of the illuminations she had copied at the Museum, hoping they would be allowed to fill up vacant places in the map on Miss Berry's wall, wrote a hasty note to her friend, and saw the parcel containing them carried out by her departing visitors with almost as much trepidation and with as many doubts and qualms of conscience and self-questionings, when the first excitement was over, as if she had been sending a token to Stephen Pierrepont himself.

All through the dusty, scorching August weeks, while the square gardens got daily browner and drearier, and the wide, handsome streets looked sleepy and deserted like the streets of some enchanted, dead city in an Eastern tale, and the crowded courts behind them bred sickness and fever that sent Margaret home from her ministrations among their inhabitants with a sadder face each day, Elsie's thoughts found refreshment in flying off from the objects round her to follow her present, and imagine the exact positions occupied now by the little drawings, over which she had pored on many past winter days.

How would the sunshine slanting through the flowering plants on the dear old window-sill make patches of light and shade over them on the wall? Who would stand under them and glance up, and perhaps ask a question, causing her name to be spoken again in the place where she longed to be remembered always! Years and years hence, when the bright colours on the illuminations had begun to fade, would not some one, looking round the room to note the changes time had made,

with quick glancing eyes that always saw everything, remark the little pictures, and walk straight up to examine them closely, and then turn round to Miss Berry with the sudden illumination of eager interest all over his face that Elsie could picture so perfectly—eager interest—nay, perhaps only a vague curiosity after so long—a hesitating question perhaps—and after the answer another look; yes, surely another long look, for the sake of old recollections, that, however deeply buried and put away, must be stirred to faint life again by all that he would see there?

There was danger in such speculations as these, agitation and unrest. When her reverie reached this point, Elsie would forcibly bring herself back into the little stifling room in Bloomsbury Street, where the afternoon sun beat in mercilessly, unimpeded by any screen of flowers, and seek some engrossing occupation; or, if her thoughts would by and bye insist on another excursion, she would confine them to the contemplation of Miss Berry's room with no more interesting visitor than Miss Tomkinson or old Mrs. Adams in it.

November had come; the streets and squares had wakened into a dull sort of half-life. Margaret's patients were sickening with cold instead of fever, and the little Bloomsbury Street sitting-room had accepted heavy yellow mist instead of dusty golden sunshine for its habitual atmosphere before Elsie heard from the Adams' again. Then, on one specially gloomy day, when old Mr. Blake was indisposed, and would do nothing but sit cowering over the fire, and Elsie, worn out with efforts to amuse him, had been driven for change of employment to slow pacing up and down the little room, and listless watchings from the window of the passers-by in the wet street, they came, bringing in with them a bustle and movement and cheery clatter of voices such as had not been heard in the house since their last visit. They would have been dearly welcome to Elsie just then, even if they had not come a few days before from Oldbury, and had been less redolent than they were of the atmosphere of the place.

Three months in Oldbury, three months of seeing the same people every day, and hearing their concerns perpetually talked over, had not passed without giving a colour to their thoughts which was still predominant. Mrs. Adams quite forgot to calculate how long they were keeping the brougham, and drew her chair close to Elsie's, and talked with almost as much animation as her mother-in-law might have done, of how old Dr. Medlock

had taken a partner, a tall, fresh-looking young man, who was well received by the principal families in the place; of how there had been a talk of her father and mother-in-law taking Laurel Lodge, which had been empty ever since the Lutridges left it, but Miss Berry had dissuaded them out of the idea, for fear Mrs. Lutridge should feel hurt, and suspect Mrs. Adams of wishing to instal herself as leading lady of the town; of how very broken down and elderly Mr. Lutridge looked now, how shabbily the daughters were dressed, and how little likelihood there seemed to be of that engagement between Miss Ursula (who was not the least bit pretty now) and young Mr. Neale of Connington ever coming to anything.

Elsie sat listening with a soft pink glow deepening minute by minute on her fair face, and a lovely light shining in her eyes, half of gratitude for the treasures of information she was gaining, half wistfully expectant of some word, some hint, some stray scrap of coveted intelligence that might be expected to be spoken soon. It was all very interesting, for it was all about Oldbury people; but as the time slipped by, she wished that Miss Adams would not turn the conversation back to the new doctor so perseveringly, and expatiate so lengthily on his being such an acquisition to the society of the place. It was not of acquisitions or of new-comers she wanted to hear; and the colour faded out of her face, and her eyes clouded over when Mrs. Adams looked at her watch at last and rose to go, before the name which had been hovering on Elsie's lips all the afternoon had been spoken by any one.

"But O mamma!" Miss Adams exclaimed, turning back just as she had reached the door, "I suppose Miss Blake will have heard the sad news from China. She will guess the terrible trouble there is at the Rectory. The telegram had not arrived when we left, or I suppose we should be thinking more about it ourselves. Grandmamma said in her letter yesterday that no one in Oldbury could talk or think of anything but of poor Stephen Pierrepont. It is dreadful for his father, is it not? Have you seen the newspaper account?"

"No," Elsie just managed to say; and as she had risen from her seat, and was standing with her back to the light, no one perceived how white all of a sudden the lips had become through which the low monosyllable came.

"Dear me! but it is pasted up before all the newspaper shops. I wonder it has not attracted your eye. 'Six Englishmen, and eighteen privates belonging to one of our Sepoy regiments,

treacherously attacked and taken prisoners by a detachment of the Tartar army.'"

"But how do you know that——?"

Miss Adams's impatience supplied the words Elsie could not speak.

"How do I know that Stephen Pierrepont is one of those that have been taken? Unfortunately there can be no doubt about it. Mr. Pierrepont has had official intelligence. His son had volunteered to go up the country with the army in Lord Elgin's suite as interpreter, or aide-de-camp, or something. That is why we have all of us in Oldbury been taking so much interest in the Chinese expedition this summer. One does not, you know, in a general way, care much what happens in those out-of-the-way countries—at least the Oldbury people don't; but this year it was felt to be a proper compliment to Mr. Pierrepont to be interested in what our army and Lord Elgin were doing. The news has been most satisfactory, except for this one mischance. We have taken the forts about which all the dispute has been, and a truce had been proclaimed. The small party of which poor Stephen Pierrepont was unhappily one were on their way to the Chinese camp, to carry an answer to some negotiations the Chinese General had begun about Lord Elgin's going to Peking, when they were treacherously set upon by a whole body of the enemy's troops, and either killed or carried off somewhere. Very little seems to be known about it at present. Papa says we ought to hope that they were killed on the spot, for the Chinese are such dreadfully cruel people, and treat their prisoners so horribly, that if they were spared it would only be to reserve them for worse tortures. Nothing more can be heard till the next mail comes in, and perhaps we shall never know exactly what their fate has been. It is dreadful, is it not? to think of such a thing happening to a person one has known and heard of all one's life. There will be great anxiety felt about Stephen Pierrepont in Oldbury; but perhaps——" A sudden recollection of something she had heard long ago, or the sound of a painful gasping breath which Elsie was struggling to keep from rising into a sob, stopped her in her glib narration of horrors; and she added, "Perhaps I ought not to have told all this so suddenly to you."

"Why not?" Elsie answered after a minute's silence, in a forced voice that sounded to herself strange and unlike her own.

"Why not? Why should not I know what all the Oldbury people know and are sorry for? I was an Oldbury person

once ; I have as much right to hear and be sorry as most of them."

"Of course we are all very sorry. Even people who do not know any of the parties concerned personally are shocked and indignant at the thought of such a fate befalling Englishmen. You may depend upon it that the Chinese will be made to pay dearly for their treachery," said Mrs. Adams, in a tone that was meant to be consolatory and triumphant.

"But that won't bring the poor captives to life again when they have been killed by ill usage, or do much good to their friends, Mamma," observed Miss Adams, intent on seeing things in the gloomiest light.

"Well, I don't know. The general sympathy will be very soothing, and I should not wonder if the Queen herself were to write letters of condolence to the near relatives of the sufferers. If Mr. Pierrepont gets such a letter, it will be a great interest to every one in Oldbury ; and no doubt all the principal families in the place will subscribe and put up a marble monument to poor young Pierrepont's memory in the old church. Mrs. Lutridge would have set such a scheme on foot immediately, if she had been what she once was ; and now I should not wonder if it falls to your grandmother or to one of us to propose and carry it out. Things have changed so these last few years in Oldbury. But now we positively must go. It is a great deal later than I had any idea of. Really it is so pleasant chatting over Oldbury news, one quite forgets oneself."

When the door had closed behind her visitors, Elsie sank down on the chair from which she had risen, and remained quite still for a long time. "As much right to hear and to be sorry as any of the Oldbury people !" Those were the words that went on repeating themselves stupidly over and over again in her mind. She would not let her thoughts get beyond them, and understand distinctly what the terrible thing was which they might all grieve over together. Yes, she had as much right as any of them to be stunned and bewildered, and to feel as if her heart were turning into stone under the horror of the picture that had been presented to her, and which she would not look at again just yet.

She was roused by her grandfather's querulous voice complaining that he was cold, and that she had nearly let the fire go out ; and she rose and went up to him and began patiently putting the coals together, and then knelt down to fan the dull embers into a flame.

The exertion brought back the power of understanding and feeling ; all the words she had heard rushed upon her in their full meaning, and she was a prey to the pain she had been mechanically warding off.

She comprehended what had happened ; saw it all vividly, just as if it were passing now. Dark, fierce, angry faces gathering round a solitary band of riders ; a short, fierce struggle, and then solitude again, in some far off, distant, strange scene—solitude broken only by a little heap of prostrate, still figures, one of them lying a little apart from the others. But no, his would not look like a dead face. Do what she would, the eyes, full of pain and yearning, would always open and look across the long distance at her. She saw all this distinctly as if she must see it always, yet she went on kneeling before the fire, diligently flapping a sheet of paper to and fro ; and she was aware of the little, swift, darting tongues of flame as they flickered up and fell in the current of the air, for they seemed to sting and pain her, as if they were actually eating into her flesh.

By and bye the fire burned brightly again, and her grandfather lay back in his chair and dropped asleep, not needing any more attention from her. She sat on the hearth-rug with her hands clasped round her knees. New thoughts began to creep in, fresh painful aspects of the subject she was contemplating :—a whole month before anything further could be known by those who had the best right to hear of him soon ; and for her, the chance of hearing the worst confirmed or denied, months hence perhaps, in some carelessly spoken, ill authenticated words, or of never knowing anything more, of never learning the few scant particulars that would be written or told to others. Never, never !

Yet, as this thought stung her with a still sharper pang than she had yet felt, she did not throw herself down on the hearth-rug or cry aloud with pain. Yes, she had as much right, just as much right to be sorry as any one in Oldbury ; but people do not cry out with pain when they hear that an acquaintance, or even a friend with whom they have had no communication for years, is dead in ever such a terrible way.

A sharp postman's knock came just then, and Elsie heard it through the tumult of her thoughts. It was not an unusual sound, for there were other lodgers in the house who often had letters ; but it made Elsie start up with sudden nervous energy, as if it must necessarily announce some news for her. The next

minute her heart sank again lower than ever. Oh, it would be always so! from this time forth she should be always hoping for news, and always sickening with disappointment when it failed to come. A fever of restlessness seized her now. She ran half-way downstairs, and met the servant coming up with lights, and—yes—Elsie's eyes fastened on it at once—a letter, a large letter, directed in a cramped, shaky handwriting to her.

"I brought it up at once, Miss," the servant said, with an inquisitive glance into Elsie's face; "it is not often as letters come for any of you."

Elsie snatched it from her, ran back into the room, and had read her letter half through by firelight before the servant and the candles reached the top of the stairs.

It was from Miss Berry, and her breathless perusal of the first page brought nothing but bewilderment. She hurried on, hoping that the meaning would dawn on her as she read.

"MY DEAREST ELSIE,

"Miss Ursula Lutridge is sitting with me now, and she has been so kind as to find out all about the trains, which I could not possibly have done myself; so I hope you will be able to travel here without any difficulty. She says you will not get my letter in time to come by an afternoon train. I wish it had been possible for you to start at once, that dearest Mrs. Lutridge's mind might sooner have been set at rest; but I will be content to expect you to-morrow, at the time she has written down on the piece of paper I enclose. Your little room will be ready; for, making certain that you would not refuse to come, I told Caroline to light a fire there directly after dearest Mrs. Lutridge opened her heart to me about her wish to see you. I am afraid it will be a trial to you to come here under these sad circumstances; for when I went up into the little attic just now, and saw all the pretty things *they* sent in that year, it all came back to me so vividly—just how handsome and merry he looked the day the new furniture arrived, and what odd excuses he kept inventing for each new present as it was brought in. But, my love, we will not believe the worst yet. Mr. Pierrepont is resolved to cling to hope as long as possible; it is only dearest Mrs. Lutridge who seems quite unable to take any but the darkest view of what has happened. She accuses herself on account of some letter which she ought to have given to you, and which she destroyed instead. She thinks that if you had had it you might have written some-

thing to Stephen Pierrepont in reply that would have prevented his going out to China, and that he might have been alive and well in Oldbury now. She sent to Mr. Pierrepont this morning and confessed her misgivings to him; and I am afraid, in his agitation, he spoke rather strongly. She has been in hysterics since, and nothing will serve her but to see you, and judge by what you say yourself whether or not she need have this terrible responsibility on her conscience. Of course she thought she was acting for the best in keeping back the letter; and, my love, don't you feel that the more unhappy we are the more ready we ought to be to forgive those who seem to have had a hand in bringing the trial upon us?

“Your affectionate Friend,

“MARY ANNE BERRY.

“P.S.—A message has just come across the road from the Lutridges' house. Miss Tomkinson has, injudiciously I fear, been showing dearest Mrs. Lutridge some pictures in the monthly *Missionary Magazine* of Chinese prisons and modes of execution. Another fit of hysterics has been the result. Do not fail to come as early as possible to-morrow.”

Elsie was still reading her letter when Margaret entered the room. She had returned home later than usual that evening, and had mounted the stairs lingeringly, with a very heavy heart, wondering how she should break to Elsie the news she had accidentally heard that day.

It was a relief to her when she discovered, by the first glance at Elsie's agitated face, that she had already heard all she was dreading to impart to her,—heard, and was somehow differently affected from what Margaret had feared. As Elsie came forward to meet her, and put the letter she had been reading into her hand, there was an eagerness almost of hope in her manner that quite took Margaret by surprise. The worst part of her pain had gone out of Elsie's heart as she read. Her thoughts had fastened on the sentence in Miss Berry's letter which implied that Mrs. Lutridge had kept back some message from Steenie to her, and she was drawing comfort and courage from that idea. There were words of his to her which she might hear yet—which she might hear, perhaps, to-morrow—that was, his being alive to her, alive and nearer to her than he had been for a long time. She could not despair with such a prospect before her. The warmth it brought to her heart forced her to hope.

He had not gone away thoughtless of her ; he had been as true to her as she had sometimes ventured to dream. He could not be dead then, just as she had found out she might rightly love him as much as she wished. This conclusion seemed perfectly logical to Elsie.

Margaret read Miss Berry's letter through slowly.

"What do you feel about it yourself?" she said hesitatingly, when she had come to the end. "Miss Berry has always been a good friend to you, but it is asking a great deal. You may go to Oldbury if you like now ; but I do not see that you are called upon to make the effort if it will cost you too much pain."

"Pain !" cried Elsie ; and then, suddenly reading the expression on Margaret's face, she added quickly, "I understand what you mean. You said *now* ; you would not let me go to Oldbury if you thought there was the least hope."

"Nay, I do not say that," Margaret interrupted. "I think there will be pain—pain and embarrassment for you in going back to Oldbury, whatever news from China may be heard while you are there ; and I think Mrs. Lutridge ought to bear her own share of the anxiety she has brought on herself, without aggravating yours. However, dearest, you are old enough now to decide for yourself. If you think it right to go to Oldbury, and wish to hear what Mrs. Lutridge has to say to you, I will not say a word to dissuade you."

"Then I will go," Elsie said. "Till you came in, I never thought it even possible to do anything else after I had read this letter."

Going back to Oldbury alone ! For the rest of the evening Elsie moved about, making preparations for the next day's journey in a dream. Moments of deep depression and shuddering realization of the circumstances under which it was undertaken came over her ; but, for the most part, she had a bewildered feeling as if it were Stephen Pierrepont himself, instead of only the hearing of some words of his to her, written long ago, that awaited her there.

CHAPTER XL

BACK IN OLDBURY.

It was a dim, still November morning when Elsie began her journey to Oldbury. She had hardly been able to see Margaret's face for the thick clinging mist when they parted at the station; but in a minute or two, when the train had left the smoke of London behind, she looked out on nothing more gloomy than a sky covered with a thin veil of lilac grey clouds, and on sodden dark-green fields spread out beneath it. There had been a night of tempest, but the storm-clouds had wept themselves away now, and the trees were sullenly rocking their bare branches to rest, wearied out after all their wild sobbing and raving for the last remnant of leaf-clothing, which the night wind had torn from them.

Elsie felt as if she were already back in Oldbury; at "home!" she called it, when she was quite clear of tokens of the town neighbourhood, and could look over solitary fields once more. She was glad it was not a bright morning. Sunshine on the green grass would have seemed to mock her—the quiet sadness was a sort of welcome.

She had not seen country trees and hedgerows since she had travelled this same road with her grandfather and Margaret, when they were leaving Oldbury. How vividly all she saw recalled her feelings of that time!

So very few events had occurred in her life during the three years she had spent in London, that their history could have been given in a sentence or two; yet, looking back to her feelings of that time, it seemed a lifetime ago.

She felt as if the storm of sorrow had wept itself out in her heart too; she could only be still and wait, not altogether hopelessly.

As she neared the end of her journey, and one well known object after another met her eyes, she felt something like a shock of surprise. She had thought of them all so much, brought them before her so often by efforts of fancy, that she could hardly believe in the possibility of their being really near—just the same as she had seen them in her dreams—not the least changed: the distant purple hills rising in the same perfect curves against the silver grey sky; the sudden dip down where, if one were nearer, the sea-line might be descried in the distance; the soft velvety sides of the downs; the fir woods in the hollows; the path by the river, where she and Margaret had oftenest walked when she was a child; the three very tall elms, in a field near the station, that Cecil had sketched one day. Then in a minute more the train had stopped, and Miss Berry's face, an odd mixture of welcoming smiles and tear stains, was peering in at the carriage window to look for her.

"My dear, I quite knew you would come," Miss Berry said, after the first greetings and inquiries were spoken. "Shall we walk up to the house and leave the luggage to come after us? It is not far. I looked in on Mrs. Lutridge as I was coming down to the station, and told her that I felt pretty confident of bringing you back; and, my love, I ventured—fearing that the unexpected sight of you at church to-morrow morning might be a shock—to call at the Rectory and tell Mr. Pierrepont about my having written to invite you. You would have been very much gratified, I think, my dear, if you had seen how he looked when your name was mentioned. He has this morning received a letter from poor Stephen, written before he had left Sir Cecil Russel's house to go on this unfortunate expedition, and sent by the longest route. It must have been like getting a letter from a dead person. Poor Mr. Pierrepont had only just finished reading it when I came in, and I could see that he had been very much moved. He quite started when I told him you were coming, for it seems Steenie had mentioned you in this letter for the first time since he went away. I don't know exactly what he wrote; poor Mr. Pierrepont could not command his voice to read the passage out loud, but at all events it is what has made him feel very kindly towards you, my dear. He said something about never losing sight of you again after this; and when I told him how pleased you were to see me a year ago, and how you loved every stick and stone belonging to Oldbury, the tears actually started into his eyes. He began to talk to me—yes, really to me—about his loneliness in the

Rectory, and how, since his son left him, he has sometimes on winter evenings looked across at the lights in my room and had a sort of jealous feeling towards it, because Stephen used to prefer so much to be there with me when he was a boy, and has, since he has been so far away, written more affectionately about my little house than about anything in his own home. It was well that the train was nearly due, and that I had to hurry away as quickly as I could, for I was so surprised I did not know what answer to make. Ah, there are Mrs. Adams and Miss James of the wool shop beckoning to you from across the road; but I will not let you speak to them, my dear, till you have been in and had some refreshment. I see you are tired, and that recognizing so many faces of old friends is almost too much for you."

By the time Elsie had partaken of the refreshment Miss Berry had prepared for her, and rested on the sofa for half an hour, as her kind hostess insisted she should, the short November day was closing in, and Miss Berry was anxious to set out on the visit to Mrs. Lutridge she had promised Elsie should pay that evening.

"I am afraid it is a little inconsiderate in me to drag you out again so soon after your journey," she said apologetically; "but, you see, dearest Mrs. Lutridge has never in her life been used to be kept waiting, and now that her circumstances and health are so sadly changed, anything at all like neglect strikes her in such a very painful light. I assure you—not that I mean to complain, for it is very gratifying to me that she should value my attention so highly, but I am obliged to be very circumspect. Ah! there is Mr. Lutridge himself coming across the road to fetch us. I am sadly afraid she has already thought it long. You will not be a minute putting on your bonnet, will you, my dear?"

"You will find Mr. Lutridge much aged and bowed down," Miss Berry whispered to Elsie as they re-entered the sitting-room, where he was awaiting them, ready for their walk.

"Bowed down" were hardly the right words to use, Elsie thought, when the tall, thin, upright old gentleman came forward and welcomed her cordially. His face was more deeply wrinkled, and his hair more snowy white than formerly; but there was a nervous briskness and fussy alacrity in his manner now, that rather took off from the signs of age. He moved and talked like a person who had been under constraint all his life, and could not get over his surprise at being able to speak and

act for himself. "Yes, it was quite his own idea to call in on his way home from the bank, and hurry their movements a little. He knew how anxious Mrs. Lutridge was, and so he had taken it upon himself. It was quite necessary, he was sorry to assure Miss Blake, for him to take these little arrangements upon himself now. Mrs. Lutridge used to think of everything, but she was no longer the active, independent person she had once been; there was a great change—a sad change—a very sad change," he kept repeating to himself smilingly, as he stood rubbing one hand over the other before Miss Berry's fire.

"But had they not better be moving?"

The Lutridges lived now in a little house in the lower part of the town, beyond the river; and as Elsie passed down the High Street she could not help noticing how, even in the deepening twilight, passers-by lingered and turned round, and how the shop-men and women came and stood out at their doors to look curiously after her. Before she reached the Lutridges' door, at least a dozen people, with some of whom she had never exchanged word before, stopped her to claim acquaintance, and congratulate themselves and her on her return to the town.

Busy, gossiping, kind-hearted, fickle Oldbury had adopted her as a central object of interest now. There was hardly anybody in the place who had not heard of her coming, and who was not busy making up stories about her, investing her with a reflected halo of interest from the uncertain fate of one whom just then they were all resolved to make a hero of. It was a great sensation for Oldbury to have one of its own townsmen concerned in a public event, about which all the newspapers in the kingdom were writing; and this inkling of an unhappy love story, in which their hero was involved, added not a little to the general excitement.

"No wonder he went out to China rather than promise to give her up" (that was the version of the history in vogue for the hour), people whispered to each other as they followed with their eyes Elsie's graceful figure passing down the street. There had always been people in Oldbury ready to stand up for Elsie's beauty, but it had never struck them so forcibly as it did just now.

The inside of Mrs. Lutridge's house was the first place that gave Elsie a hint that time had not stood still in Oldbury since she left the place. She and Miss Berry were shown into a little dark sitting-room downstairs, while Mr. Lutridge went to inquire if Mrs. Lutridge was ready to receive her visitors, and

the five daughters, one after the other, dropped in to shake hands with Elsie. They had all lost their youthful looks very early. Mrs. Williams, the married daughter, who, with her two children, was now on a long visit to her parents, sat in an arm-chair in one corner of the room, rocking a crying baby to sleep, and taking very little notice of any one. Pretty Miss Ursula, very worn and faded, and with a permanent frown fixed between her plaintive blue eyes, was carrying on an intermitting struggle with the elder child for the possession of her work-box.

"These children get hold of and spoil everything," she explained, in a feebly complaining tone to Elsie; "and we dare not attempt to control them in any way, for poor Mamma always takes their part, and expects us to give up everything to them. She seems quite to have forgotten now how particular she used to be with us when we were children. It's strange how very inconsistent people can be. I am afraid you may have to wait here some time, poor Mamma is so very changeable. She was impatient to see you this morning, but since dinner she has fallen into one of her silent moods, and snaps one up if one says a word. One really never knows what to expect, and it makes one's life very trying."

At length Mr. Lutridge returned, and took Elsie into another room, where Mrs. Lutridge was reclining on an invalid sofa. She started half upright as they entered, and looked eagerly at Elsie. Her eyes had the old sharp, questioning glance in them from which Elsie used to shrink away when she was a child, but the rest of the face was much changed. Her lips, which used to meet firmly together in a happy smile of self-complacency, trembled and twitched nervously as she was preparing to speak.

"Put a chair close to the sofa for Miss Blake," she said, addressing her husband in a querulous voice, "and then do go back to the sitting-room downstairs. I heard all the girls go in one after the other, and I know they'll begin chattering to Miss Berry as soon as they are alone with her, telling her all sorts of things, and complaining of me. Do go down and keep them quiet while I talk to Miss Blake; I shan't be able to think of what I want to say to her if I am worrying myself with wondering what is going on downstairs."

Mr. Lutridge prepared to obey, but before he could close the door behind him a sound of voices in animated conversation was distinctly heard from below. Mrs. Lutridge paused, in a sentence she had begun to Elsie, to listen.

"Yes," she said in a bitter tone, "that is always the way; they never any of them have anything to say to me, though I lie here all day long, and never get any change; but if a visitor, who can go about where she likes, comes in, they find their tongues fast enough. Young people are very ungrateful; one wears one's self out acting for the best for them, and when one is quite laid aside they only think how they can take advantage of it to get the most of their own way. I don't say that one's plans have always turned out as one hoped and expected; but even when misfortunes have come of them, it is not for the young to judge their elders' doings harshly. They should remember that they took responsibility on themselves for their advantage."

The first part of the sentence was murmured half to herself; but as she went on she sat up a little higher on the sofa and again fixed eager, questioning eyes on Elsie's face. Her voice sounded harsh and hard, but the hand she put out to emphasize her words, in her old manner, shook painfully.

Elsie left her seat and came and knelt down by the side of the sofa, for she was trembling too much to sit still; her soft eyes had a tender pleading look in them. She read on Mrs. Lutridge's flushed, agitated countenance, the struggle that was going on in her mind—anxiety and remorse fighting against her old habit of self-justification; and she feared most of all to lose a word of what she had come so far to hear.

"I shall not blame you," she said softly, "for anything you planned or did for his good, even if it was against me. I will try hard to believe you did it for the best, and never to blame you, if only you will tell me the whole truth now. You know what I mean. You can tell me exactly what he wrote now, when my knowing it cannot make any difference to any one."

"It would not have made any difference at the time," Mrs. Lutridge interrupted, in a sharp pained voice; "that is just what I want you to explain to everybody. It ought not to have altered anything, if you had received Stephen Pierrepont's letter. If I were not so weak and nervous, I should see it clearly, and not trouble myself about a trifling circumstance that has, in reality, nothing to do with our present trouble. I was overcome when the news came. Miss Berry should not have acted so promptly; it would have been much better if you had never come."

"But you will tell me, now I am here, about the letter?"

Elsie pleaded. "A letter, was it not from him, that you were to have given me?"

"It was a very foolish, inconsiderate letter; not at all the sort of letter his father, who entrusted it to me to deliver, believed it to be. I shall always maintain he was not justified in writing it; I shall say so to every one, even if—" a sudden quiver of emotion passed over her face, and she added in an altered, excited tone of voice, "But I wish—oh, I do wish Stephen Pierrepont had never left England! You might just as well have written to ask him to stay at home without getting his letter. Young people do such unheard-of things now-a-days. They don't stand on ceremony about their friends' consent. My son has acted far worse to me than Stephen Pierrepont would have done if he had married you against his father's advice; but I don't wish that my son had died first. When I was most angry with him, I never said anything of the kind."

There was a troubled, wandering look in her eye as she spoke, and Elsie began to despair of ever getting an answer to her question.

"I did not know that Stephen Pierrepont intended to leave England till after he had sailed," she said. "How could I have done anything? Do you really mean that he wrote to tell me? If you will give me the letter now, I will never complain of you for keeping it so long, and making me think him unkind all these years. I have not often blamed him, and so it will not be so hard to forgive you, if only you will tell me all now."

"I have not got the letter now. I should not have kept it back all this time if I had had it by me. I was taking it to you, and your Aunt Margaret refused to let me see you; and then, while I was holding it in my hand looking at the writing, a gust of wind blew it into the river. Elsie Blake, don't look at me so; fixing your eyes in that dreadful way. I did it for the best; and your having his letter would not have altered what has happened since. I wish to tell you the whole truth, that you may answer me quite fairly; that is why I sent for you. The writing was so large, and the envelope so thin, I could not help reading a sentence or two and guessing more. It was about his going out to China he wrote. He said he would stay in England, if he could be of any use to you; if it would comfort you in your sorrow to know that he was near watching over you, even if he were not able to see you often. You could not have been so selfish as to accept such a sacrifice. You would not have let him injure his prospects, and offend his

father and uncle for your sake. You are a good girl, and you could not have foreseen what has happened. You would have sent him from you, even if you had had his letter offering to stay."

There was a long pause. Elsie could not find any words to answer. She covered her face with her hands.

"He would have stayed for me. He might, through a word of mine, have been near me now," she whispered low to herself. She could not tell whether it was great joy or great pain that made her heart swell as if it were bursting. To her, love was so much more than life, death such a much less formidable separation than estrangement, that the certainty of her lover's faithfulness overweighed every other thought for the moment. Dead or not he was hers—always would be hers now! She need never have another unkind thought of him—another painful doubt of the reality of his love.

Mrs. Lutridge dragged away her hands impatiently at last, and was puzzled by the strange triumphant look of the tear-wet face she peered down into.

"Why don't you speak? I think you might answer me since you have come so far, and given me the agitation of saying so much. I can't bear people to cry in that quiet way; it shows a sort of sullenness that is worse than anything. Tell me what you would have done, if you had had that letter."

"It will only hurt you if I answer," Elsie said hesitatingly. "I was selfish then, and very, very miserable. I should have asked him to stay. I should not have been able to believe it would have been bad for him, and whatever else had happened, we should have trusted each other all these years; we should have had that happiness. It is past now. I will try hard to forgive you—try to think it was not your doing; that all has been ordered rightly; but I can't talk to you any more to-day. I had rather go away now, if you please."

She rose quickly and went to the door, but paused when she opened it to look into the room again. Mrs. Lutridge was lying back on the sofa very pale, with her two hands pressed tightly over her heart.

"I am very sorry for you," Elsie faltered. "Can I do anything for you? I will stay if you like, or shall I send some one?"

"No, no, I had rather be left alone. I can hear the girls talking and laughing downstairs now you have opened the

door. Mr. Lutridge could not have gone down when I asked him. I wish you would go, and take Miss Berry away with you, and then there will be silence enough in the house. I am disappointed in you, Elsie Blake. You are not such a sensible, right-thinking girl as I hoped to find you. I shall not want to see you again. You may go back to London as soon as you like. Even if I change my mind and send for you to-morrow, you need not come, for it will never give me any pleasure now to see you."

CHAPTER XL

SUSPENSE.

MRS. LUTRIDGE did change her mind, and sent for Elsie to come again to her before twenty-four hours were over. And in spite of the previous prohibitions, Miss Berry advised Elsie to obey the summons. "Dearest Mrs. Lutridge had a way of desiring people never to come near her again, and then of sending in a hurry for them; but nobody in Oldbury now thought of being offended by her little peculiarities," she explained.

Elsie's second visit was a more amicable one than the first, and it came to be a custom, during the month she remained in Oldbury, that she should spend some hours of each day seated by the sofa of the invalid lady. Mrs. Lutridge scolded her a good deal, and asked her embarrassing questions about her feelings and intentions towards Stephen Pierrepont, if he ever should return in safety to England. But she grew fond of her in her own way, and seemed to derive so much benefit from her visits that the Miss Lutridges united in a pathetic entreaty that Elsie would never get angry or be driven away by anything their mother might say.

"It was such an immense relief to *them*," they explained with unconscious selfishness, "for poor Mamma to have found some one fresh to pour out all her old complaints to. It was almost always the same story, and they were so tired of hearing it, and did find it so difficult to think of any new answer to make."

Elsie found that answering Mrs. Lutridge was not a chief necessity; to sit still with an acquiescing expression of face while she talked, was generally all that was required. Elsie was at all times a good listener, and under present circumstances

she proved the very best that could have been found for the nervous, petulant invalid. It really did not weary her to hear the same troubles detailed again and again, and to travel over the incidents of the last three years with her companion step by step, and listen while she analysed all the pain they had brought her. She could slip her soft hand into Mrs. Lutridge's, with as genuine a movement of sympathy at the twentieth time of hearing a sharp grief described, as at the first. She had been living with the Oldbury people ever since she had left them, in a blind sort of a way, and now the hearing of the events that had actually occurred among them seemed to her like the lifting up of a veil that had been hiding her true life from her. She could only feel weary as people are wearied with living their own lives and pitying themselves. And when Stephen Pierrepont's name came into the conversation, as it frequently did, it never occurred to her to attribute Mrs. Lutridge's extreme anxiety about his fate to remorse for the share she had had in sending him away. It seemed to her so perfectly natural that she should be anxious. The only unnatural thing was that any one in Oldbury could speak or think of anything but of what news the next mail would bring.

There was another person in Oldbury besides Mrs. Lutridge, who was strongly attracted to Elsie just at this time by her power of sympathetic listening.

Mr. Pierrepont had much sympathy pressed upon him by his parishioners and friends during these days of anxious suspense; but among all those who professed to share his anxiety, he found no one but Elsie Blake to whom he could talk freely of his hopes and fears, without now and then getting a look or word that betokened a less absorbed interest than the theme, in his estimation, deserved.

All the Oldbury people really cared a great deal about Steenie Pierrepont, and were very anxious to know whether he was alive or dead. But then they had a great many other things to think of. They would forget precisely how many days and hours must elapse before fresh intelligence could be received; they were capable of hazarding conjectures which betrayed a strange ignorance of the exact circumstances that were likely to imperil or secure his safety. There was only Elsie Blake who listened always with just the right look of breathless interest on her face, when he recapitulated his reasons for hoping still against all adverse opinions; who never made a mistake, or forgot anything that had ever been said on the subject; and whose

low uttered replies showed full comprehension of what he was feeling, and had the true ring of sympathy in them.

There had been some embarrassment about their first meeting. When Mr. Pierrepont entered Miss Berry's little sitting-room the day after Elsie arrived, and found her there, he was a good deal agitated ; he turned away abruptly after shaking hands with her, and stood silent for some minutes in the window recess before he could recover his self-command. Elsie, on her side, was much too frightened to speak a word to him while he stayed. But after that first meeting was got over they fell into habits of intimacy very quickly.

Mr. Pierrepont came regularly every afternoon to Miss Berry's house, and sometimes Elsie went back to the Rectory with him, and paced up and down the elm-tree walk in the garden, while the twilight was falling. It was wonderful how instinctively they each seemed to understand what the other was feeling and thinking about.

As the day that was to end suspense drew near, Mr. Pierrepont's inclination to discuss probabilities as to the news it would bring lessened, and at last ceased altogether ; and then Elsie could sit or walk by his side in absolute silence, understanding without words how low the light of hope was flickering in his heart, as the feared yet longed-for moment approached—conveying to him by a silent hand-clasp at night, by a mute glance in the morning, her mingled congratulation and condolence that another dreadful, hopeful twelve hours had actually been lived through by them both.

On the day before that on which the news was likely to arrive, Mr. Pierrepont and Elsie took a long walk together in the afternoon. They had both been too feverishly restless all day to sit still for many minutes together ; nothing but exercise out of doors could make the hours endurable.

They walked side by side and almost in silence a long way out of the town, and came back by the river, and up through the steep hill fields, into the churchyard. Elsie had previously paid several visits to the churchyard, and now, when she had stood for a moment or two by her grandmother's grave, Mr. Pierrepont led her to another mound, and pointed out the inscription on the head-stone. He had never taken any one to his wife's grave before, not even his son. "To-morrow," he said, in a low voice to Elsie as they turned away, "we shall know—I shall know—whether or not this is all I have on earth. If our fears are realized, there will not be even another grave." Then, having

once broken silence, he talked to her all the rest of the way home of his son, not, as he had done hitherto, of the chances for or against his being still alive, but of Stephen himself; of the early days when he in his loneliness and sorrow had wished and had not been able to make himself an acceptable companion to his child; of how he had looked forward for years to some time when he and his son should live more together, and be more to each other than they had ever yet been; and of the blank he should feel if to-morrow told him that such a season could never possibly come to him. People might think that the Rectory would not be emptier than it had been lately. Yes, it would be emptied of all the hopes and visions he had filled it with for more than twenty years. He had been dwelling on the prospect of his son's return more hopefully than usual during the six months that preceded the arrival of the bad news; he had allowed himself to reckon on it as he had never done before. Elsie almost envied him for having had these months of expectation and hope.

"Whatever we hear to-morrow," Mr. Pierrepont said, as they parted on Miss Berry's door step, "you will always be a daughter to me after this."

Elsie never quite knew how the next day passed. The morning post hour arrived and brought no letter. Mr. Pierrepont sent a message across to say that he had not heard; but he did not make his appearance in Miss Berry's sitting-room all day. It was too rainy for Elsie to go out. She did not attempt to employ herself. She sat still, feeling nothing but the blankness of disappointment; her thoughts occupied with dread of having to undergo again such a moment as she had undergone that morning, while she watched the postman giving in his letters at the Rectory gate.

Miss Berry drew down the blinds, and shut the house up early, with a vague idea of making the next day come quicker by so doing. Elsie was mechanically lighting Stephen's lamp, when a quick, tremulous knock came at the door. Miss Berry flew to open it, and Mr. Pierrepont entered impetuously. He strode up to Elsie without seeing Miss Berry, and placed a folded paper in her hands.

"Read," he said in a hoarse voice; "I dare not. It's a telegram from the Foreign Office, just come."

Elsie tore the paper open and read,—*"Stephen Pierrepont is safe, and with his friends."* She could only whisper the words, for all the blood seemed to have rushed from her heart while

she was in the act of opening the paper. Safe—safe! For a minute they all three,—Mr. Pierrepont, Miss Berry, and Elsie—stood staring at the word with fixed, frightened eyes, as if they expected it would fade away or change into another. Then slowly the two most concerned realized their great joy. Mr. Pierrepont took Elsie in his arms, and called her his dear daughter, and kissed her. She could not even cry for joy at first, the re-action was so great she could only stand trembling. It might so easily have been a different word she had had to read out, and the thought of the agony that might have been possessed her so strongly, that it was some time before she had power to grasp the certainty of happiness and make it real. She heard Mr. Pierrepont speaking earnest, reverent words of thanksgiving; and as she sank on her knees by his side, the rush of joyful tears came, and her thoughts grew clear as they rose in gratitude for the deliverance that had been vouchsafed to them.

Miss Berry was the first to waken to recollections of the outside world. "Dearest Mrs. Luttridge!" she exclaimed suddenly. "What are we thinking of, to leave her all this time in suspense while we are relieved from anxiety? Mr. Pierrepont! Elsie! Of course I don't mean to blame either of you; but I do wonder at myself. Positively it is a full hour since the telegram came, and no one in the town knows the happy tidings but ourselves, unless, indeed, Caroline listening at the door, as she naturally will have done, has caught up something, and spread the news. If you will excuse me, I will put on my bonnet at once; or perhaps we had better all go in a body together to Mrs. Luttridge's house, and enjoy the delight of making her as happy as ourselves."

Elsie would gladly have excused herself from joining in the expedition, but Mr. Pierrepont declared he must return at once to the Rectory to write the good news to Lady Selina Deane before the last post went out, and she did not like to leave Miss Berry to walk alone.

In another quarter of an hour they turned out into the lamp-lit street, but somehow or another the good news had already got wing, and before they reached Mrs. Luttridge's house a triumphant peal of bells burst out from the church-tower, and carried rejoicing into every house in Oldbury, for everybody was thinking of Steenie, and understood at once what the joyful clamour meant to tell them. Mr. Pierrepont did well to hurry over his letter, for his door was besieged all the rest of the evening with visitors longing to hear and congratulate, and

satisfy themselves by seeing the telegram with their own eyes. Steenie had always been a great favourite with the townspeople of all degrees, and Mr. Pierrepont felt as if he learned to know his son better than he had ever done before, as he listened to the stories of him in his childhood and boyhood, which his rich and poor friends could not refrain from telling that evening in the excitement of their joy at the tidings of his safety.

The walk to and from Mrs. Lutridge's house that dark evening, while the bells were pealing overhead, and people were gathering in joyous groups in the streets, and her heart was dancing in time to the music and laughter, was all the rest of her life a radiant memory to Elsie. In the far distant lands in which it is now her lot to live, the scene will often come back to her suddenly, and bring a beautiful light to her eyes, and a happy smile to her lips that puzzles bystanders. The tropical scenery and the dark faces, and the hot, breathless atmosphere round her, for a moment or two, give place to the identical sights and sounds and sensations of that hour. She sees and feels it all again: the irregular lamp-lit street, the cloudy sky, the chill November air, the happy faces, the clear, sweet music of the bells, and the tumult of joy in her own heart. It is a great gift in a life to have one such brilliant hour to look back upon. The delight of it is hardly grasped at the time; human capacity of feeling fails in supreme moments of joy or pain. The sense of reality slips from us; and we seem to be suffering or rejoicing in a dream. It is afterwards in looking back that the distinct vision comes, and we find that the hour's experience has stamped itself ineffaceably on our souls, darkening or brightening them for all the rest of our lives.

The next morning brought a soberer, more comprehending thankfulness—a thankfulness that was touched with awe and sorrow too, when the letters and newspapers arrived, and full particulars of Stephen's adventures, and of the dreadful fate of some of his companions in captivity, came to be known. A shade of sadness was cast over Mr. Pierrepont's and Elsie's rejoicings, as they read the heart-rending account of the cruelties to which that division of the captured party to which Stephen belonged had been subjected. His knowledge of the Chinese language had procured him somewhat better treatment than had been dealt to his companions; and he was the only European of the party who survived to be brought back to the camp with the remnant of their Sepoy escort, after the vigorous measures of Lord Elgin had frightened the Chinese General into wishing to

atone for the treachery of which his subordinates had been guilty.

Mr. Pierrepoint brought all the Chinese letters and newspapers to Miss Berry's parlour, and gave them to Elsie to open and read to him. There was a short note from Stephen, written on the evening of his release. He made light of his own share of suffering; but Elsie shuddered as she read. It was plain enough that there was a great deal kept back, "to be talked out," Stephen wrote, "some evening when he should be sitting quietly over the fire in the old library at Oldbury; just then he confessed he was too much shaken by all he had gone through, and by the sad fate of his late companions, to be able to write much."

There was also a long letter from Cecil to Mr. Pierrepoint, which Elsie was told to read. The first part had been written at Shanghai, after news of Stephen's capture had reached Sir Cecil and his daughter. It was a chronicle of the days of suspense—each evening a few lines recording the rumours of the day; the more or less of hope or fear that had come to them, very carefully and fearfully worded always, evidently with the thought constantly in the writer's mind that her words might be read when every hopeful expression would seem a mockery of the reader's certainty of sorrow. In the middle came a break. The rebel army was threatening Shanghai; and Cecil was hurried away by her father, and forced to take refuge, with the other European ladies and children in the town, on board the English men-of-war that guarded the harbour, while her father stayed in the town to give what help he could in protecting English property. Cecil's despair at leaving her father in danger evidently obliterated every other feeling at that time. The few lines with which she had intended to conclude her letter were almost too confused and tear-blotted to be made out even by Elsie's quick eyes.

But Cecil had opened her letter a few days later, and added a postscript before it was sent off. All was quiet again. The rebels had occupied the town and gone away, having effected little injury to any one. She was with her father again, and the news of Stephen's safety had reached them. There was not time or room for more than a sentence of fervent, wondering thankfulness at his escape. Stay, on minute inspection, Elsie found another postscript squeezed up in very small writing in a corner. She began reading, and before she had gone far, stopped short in dire confusion and dismay. "Papa says, that

after all this we shall most likely come home soon—that is to say, at the very first moment when he can, consistently with his duty, get away. He is very much knocked up himself with all the hard work he has had ; and Stephen's health is sure to suffer from what he has gone through in that fearful prison. Nothing but home will set either of them right again. By the way, I wish you would find out and let me know before we come back whether or not it is true that Elsie Blake is married to Richard Lutridge. You will think it odd that I should ask such a question at such a time as this ; but I should like to have it answered before we set out for England. The voyage won't do Stephen the good that is expected from it if he is dreading bad news at the end ; and if your answer is what I hope, I am certain that he will recover twice as fast."

Elsie paused when she came to her own name ; but Mr. Pierrepont got up and read the remaining clause of the sentence over her shoulder. When she had recovered from her confusion enough to look up, she saw an amused smile on his face.

"This is the second time I have been asked to contradict that curious report," he said ; "and my letter to Stephen with a satisfactory negative was started on its way to Shanghai a week ago. I believe what that letter contains will be more effectual in raising Stephen's spirits than the mere matter-of-fact answer Cecil asks for."

Elsie felt a little less at ease with Mr. Pierrepont after this incident. His manner to her did not change when the first burst of joyful feeling on hearing the good news was over, but she could no longer be quite the same to him. She could not now let him talk to her of Stephen, and take her interest for granted, as comfortably as she had done in the days of suspense.

"After all," she kept asking herself, "how could he and Cecil ever have believed for a moment that I had married Richard Lutridge? How their thoughts of me must have changed ! Can they possibly care much for seeing again a person of whom they have such a poor opinion?"

In the happiest times people generally contrive to find some pin-point weapon with which to sting themselves away from too giddy a height of content ; and this question served the purpose for Elsie. It came into her mind when Mr. Pierrepont spoke most kindly to her, and when Miss Berry indulged in visions of having everybody she most cared about settled in Oldbury. It

was almost a relief when, at the end of the week, a letter arrived from Margaret begging her to return to London immediately. She had already been away longer than they had at first anticipated, and her grandfather missed her sadly, Margaret wrote. Miss Berry was obliged to give way to this urgency, and, to Elsie's intense surprise, Mr. Pierrepont insisted on making a journey to London on purpose to give her back himself into her aunt's charge. He would not hear anything about her being quite able to travel alone, or of her having always of late years had to take care not only of herself, but of her infirm grandfather. He seemed to consider that circumstances were greatly changed with her now. She had grown to be a personage of great importance in his eyes, and must consent to be made much of.

CHAPTER XLII.

A LAST WALK UNDER THE ELMS.

INEVITABLE delays occurred. Public business obliged Sir Cecil Russel to remain at Shanghai longer than he had expected ; and as his health had been much impaired by the anxiety of the last few months, he could not dispense with Stephen Pierrepont's services. Every letter that came from Stephen or Cecil to Oldbury was full of impatient longings for home ; but it was not until the autumn of the ensuing year that news of their having actually sailed for England reached the Rectory. And even then Mr. Pierrepont's joy in the prospect of their return was somewhat damped by a passage in Sir Cecil's last letter, which expressed his belief that Stephen had not taken his final leave of the country, for that the prominent part he had lately taken in the business of the consulate, and the great ability he had shown, would probably lead to his appointment to the post Sir Cecil intended to resign.

Meanwhile several changes had occurred in Elsie's life. In the spring of the year, old Mr. Blake died suddenly while sleeping in his chair, with no one but his grand-daughter near him. The sleep of life slid into the death sleep so gradually and tranquilly, that for some time Elsie did not suspect the change that had taken place.

His death broke up the house in Wilton Street. Margaret carried out a project she had long entertained, and became a member of a small community of women who, without parade or distinction, were devoting their time and means to missionary work in the poorest and most neglected districts of London—"Sisters of the Poor" in reality, as well as in name ; and Elsie

went to live with her grandmother, Mrs. Neale, till Stephen Pierrepont should come to claim her.

Their first meeting, after so many years of separation, took place in the gloomy house through which Elsie had once wandered with such despair in her heart.

She was sitting upstairs in Mrs. Neale's room, reading a novel aloud to her, when a little pencil note in Stephen Pierrepont's handwriting was brought to her. She had had no opportunity of consulting the newspapers to see if the vessel by which he was expected was telegraphed, and she was wearying for news.

"I landed only a few hours ago," the note said, "and I must be at Oldbury to-night! Will you not see me at once?"

Mrs. Neale, impatient at the long interruption to the reading, looked over Elsie's shoulder and read the words aloud before the handwriting had left off dancing before her eyes.

"Yes, of course you will go," she said. "Go down and get it over. You may as well give me the book and then you need not hurry. I shall live very contentedly with the heroine through all the vicissitudes of her history, while you are acting out a single page or so of yours down there. It belongs to the difference in our ages, my dear—the vicarious stage of love-making is the most enjoyable of the two, I assure you; and you will come to it by and bye. What! I am to kiss you before you go! There! Don't lose that little bit of rose colour in your cheeks before you reach the drawing-room, and he will see at a glance that you are twenty times handsomer than you were four years ago, and be very much obliged to me for having routed you out of the quaint way of dressing Margaret had brought you up to. When you have had your first talk, bring him up for me to see what he is like. Now go; the longer you linger, the worse it will seem."

Elsie ran downstairs, but paused with her hand on the lock of the sitting-room door. The four years stretched themselves out in her thoughts like a great plain of distance, and the recollections behind looked dim and unreal. It would be, after all, a stranger's face—to whom she should look strange—that would confront her when she opened the door. She heard quick, impatient steps pacing the room within, and in desperation she turned the handle and entered. Then, in one moment, the four years seemed to fall away from her as if they had never been; all the pains and anxieties and doubts of them wiped out from her soul, done away with for ever. She was on the sunny

hill-side again at Oldbury, and the Stephen Pierrepont who came forward, with both hands stretched out to meet her, and a glow of happiness and love on his face, was the triumphant young lover with whom she had joined hands and walked down the hill, in the autumn sunshine, and with whom she had parted at the gate of the old Oldbury home, it might have been yesterday. She would have said it must have been only yesterday, but for the sense of rest and quiet thankfulness that filled her heart as she looked into his face and felt his arms round her: such deep repose and thankfulness as can only be felt in moments of fulfilled hope, after years of wearying waiting and struggles with despair.

For some months after that day Elsie's life became rather a difficult problem for her to manage; it was almost impossible to satisfy the conflicting claims that were made on her time. Mrs. Neale, pleading that she was soon to lose her altogether, was more exacting of attention from her than she had ever been before; and Stephen and Cecil were very resolute against her being involved in what they called a new servitude.

"She had been somebody's slave all her life?" Stephen declared; and, by way of vindicating her freedom, he was always coming down upon her at unexpected times, and insisting on her leaving whatever she might be doing with Mrs. Neale, to come out with him, or spend an hour in Cecil's company.

Mrs. Neale would have been reasonably willing to concede Elsie, at certain stated times, to her lover and his friends; but Stephen could never be brought to acknowledge that any one had the smallest claim on her time or attention but himself. He and Mrs. Neale were always quarrelling over her; yet, in spite of their disagreements, they conceived a strong liking for each other's company. Stephen's inroads into the house, and the fresh interests and life he brought there, did Mrs. Neale good. She was roused out of the apathy in which she had been sunk for years, and became capable of enjoying some of her old pleasure in society again. In talk with Stephen or Sir Cecil, little sparks of the sprightliness and wit for which she had been famous once were called out. She was the charming, fascinating hostess once more; and she was not insensible to the pleasure of exercising her long disused powers. She was persuaded to leave her boudoir and come down stairs; the dismal shut up rooms were renovated; sunshine and life and cheerful associations were let in to dispel the brooding, deathlike atmosphere that had reigned

in them so long. Elsie had the satisfaction of believing that when she left the household could not possibly fall back into quite its old melancholy condition again.

The wedding was fixed to take place in February. Meanwhile Stephen's appointment to the post his uncle resigned was secured. It was settled that he and Elsie were to leave England for China at the end of the summer, which they were to spend with Mr. Pierrepont in Oldbury; and Cecil and her father were busy discussing and finally arranging a plan for their future life in England.

Mr. Pierrepont was a party to all their consultations; but somehow Stephen was so constantly in London at Mrs. Neale's house, or so occupied in discoursing on Elsie's perfections when he and his cousin were alone together, that Cecil never had an opportunity of telling him all she wished about the new life opening before her, till one mild February afternoon, two days before the wedding, when he and she chanced to be at Oldbury together, and were at leisure to spend the interval between lunch and its growing too dark to stay out of doors in pacing the elm-tree walk together. Then Cecil recounted, more circumstantially than she had hitherto done, the reasons that had induced her father to give up his London house, and how they had come to decide on establishing themselves in Oldbury.

Stephen listened to a good deal of what she said in silence, with only slight gestures of dissent now and then, when she drew lively pictures of the enjoyment she expected to have, and the changes for the better she was to work in Oldbury society.

"No, no, Cecil," he observed at last; "I have not said a word hitherto, but I hope you have not thought me so selfishly absorbed in my own happiness, as not to have seen what you have been doing. It would be too absurd to attempt to thank you; I can only be dumb before such an immense obligation. It is for my father's sake you are giving up so much—I understand that; yet I know you feel that by settling here and taking my place with my father you are removing the one cloud—the fear I sometimes feel that my marriage with Elsie, which we both see makes it undesirable for me to be much at Oldbury, is a bad thing for my father, and will prevent my being the comfort to him I ought to be. You make it all right for us, and send us away quite happy."

"You mean to say that you would not have left England again; that you would have chosen some other profession, and contrived to be a great deal here in Oldbury with him, if, if——"

"If—we may as well say it out at once—if Elsie's family history had not been what it is. My father has accepted her as his daughter, thoroughly and generously—he has quite got over any prejudice against her he might once have felt—yet I don't think we could reasonably expect that, if we had settled down here, annoyances would not have recurred. Even if it had not been so, the facts of the case remain the same; and I cannot think the right way is to ignore or forget them. I feel I am taking an obligation on myself. There will now be something to redeem. I cannot sit down to a quiet, comfortable life in England. I want to go where I see the best chance opened out before me of rendering some public service, of possibly earning some honourable distinction that will in a degree compensate for the one shameful recollection I shall share, and that my children, if I have any, must inherit. The desire to lessen that evil will always be an additional spur to exertion with me. I cannot think lightly of it or forget it, nor can Elsie. You have always known how I felt about this."

"Yes; and, Stephen, ever since I knew the history of Elsie's life I have wished to help you to lift the doom of sorrow from her. If it can only be done by sharing it, I want a little bit of the shadow to come on me too. I have not helped to bring about the marriage; it seems Prince Kung did you that service when he took you prisoner and all but murdered you; but if I am really making the marriage right, taking up the stitch of obligation that might have been dropped, that is better still. And you must not get it into your head that we are not going to enjoy ourselves here. Papa thinks he shall like the quiet of Oldbury; and if it suits him, of course I shall be happy."

"The advantage to my father of having you both settled near him is so immense that I can't find it in my heart to say a word against it; but I am afraid you will both be thrown away here, and that you hardly know to what you are condemning yourselves. It is a sacrifice, and there is no use in attempting to talk me out of being grateful for it. How many vicarious sacrifices it takes to do away with the cruel results of one sin! Nothing but sacrifices seem to have power to do it."

"But I will not allow you to call our settling here a sacrifice; I mean it to turn out such an excellent, happy arrangement for every one."

"Well, at all events, there is one life that has been a long sacrifice. Do you know why Gilbert Neale will not be present to give his niece away the day after to-morrow?"

"Is he not coming to the wedding? I am sorry. I thought at one time he relented, and promised to give you his countenance."

"At one time; but something has happened to change his feelings since. He talked very openly to me last night; but I had heard the greater part of the story before from Elsie, and I believe there is no objection to my telling you. He and Margaret Blake were engaged to be married long ago. The engagement was broken off after Gilbert's brother's death, but he has never ceased to love her. While her brother lived he could only keep out of her way, but lately, since we returned to England, he has proposed to Margaret again, and she has refused him. Elsie took the refusal very much to heart; she is so sure that Margaret still thinks of the old times very tenderly. She wanted me to remonstrate, but I have never dared."

"I should think not indeed; it would have been great presumption in you. No one but Margaret herself could judge on such a subject. I can understand that it must seem impossible to her, after all she has suffered, after going down into such depths of pain, and being fitted for the work she has undertaken now by such bitter experience, to give that up, and go back to just such a luxurious, commonplace life at Connington as she would have had if she had never known any very great trial. It would seem such a waste—like cutting out the greater part of her life and making it of no use."

"But I don't see that. I don't see why she should not find use for all the high lessons experience of suffering has taught her, in what you are pleased to call commonplace married life."

"Yes, she might, but not at Connington—not with Gilbert Neale. He would have expected her to forget and put all the past away, as if it had never been, and content herself with the comfortable, pleasure-seeking life her neighbours were leading. Anything that marked her out, and turned people's thoughts to the painful part of her history, he would have disliked and resented. He has come out of his sorrow on quite a different side from Margaret; and however much alike they were once, there is a great gulf between them now. Margaret Blake is not a person to turn her back on the past. You ought to understand her, for you said just now you felt, in becoming the husband of Elsie Blake, that you took an obligation on yourself. Margaret feels the obligation far more strongly, and I think in a higher way. You are only thinking of wiping out

the disgrace that might come upon the descendants of this one family. Margaret does not think so much of the disgrace, as of the actual wrong done in the world by one of her own kin ; she wants to make some little amends for that, by devoting her life to work among the neglected and fallen, hoping to redeem some from sin. She has no time to live for herself."

"I admire her present work as much as you can do, but Elsie cannot quite reconcile herself to the contrast she fancies there will be between her lot and her aunt's. She will always be picturing Margaret to herself nursing fever patients in damp cellars or stifling attics in Whitechapel and Shoreditch, while we are wandering about the Oldbury fields this summer.

"But Margaret Blake is far happier doing that than she would be paying morning calls, or giving dinner-parties at Connington, or even wandering about the summer fields with some one she loved as much as Elsie loves you. People are not all alike. Only look at Margaret Blake's face when she is talking about her work ; what a radiance there is on it now. How different from the stony look it had when she was only bearing, and had not got to the work. I did think her life dismal then, when I did not know what was its meaning, and what it was fitting her for. There are some lots like yours and Elsie's, that look complete from the first. Some people have beautiful, well rounded lives given them to live out. Others seem to have for their share only supplementary lives, woven in here and there with other people's just to eke them out where they are wanting, but never quite blended with any one life, or taking a completed form of their own. The supplementary lives don't look so satisfactory, but perhaps that is because we don't see enough of them ; they are curves of grander circles that pass out of our ken."

"Well, you must let me wish you a complete small circle of your own for your life. I don't want you to be one of the grand curves, wandering off into sublime regions where we insignificant, happy people can't follow you. May I not wish for you some such crowning day in your life as I am to have the day after to-morrow ?"

"No ; don't trouble yourself to wish anything about me. We shall know well enough how to follow each other's lives in thought for some years to come at least. I shall always be able to see you and Elsie in the Government House at Shanghai, doing your best to make the rooms look homelike—taking your early rides up and down the horrible dusty parade, and

looking out over the crowded harbour, and trying to think you get a sea-breeze."

"But I shall not be able to picture you at Laurel House, acting the distinguished part of leading lady of Oldbury. I perceive that Mrs. Lutridge has succumbed at once; she has not shown fight at all."

"Ah! I told you long ago I could manage Mrs. Lutridge, and I will astonish you now by confessing that I am actually getting to like her. She is very much altered; and after all, at the worst of times, she really wished to do good to her neighbours. She had higher aims in life than many people."

"That is not saying much. I am glad it is you and not I who have to deal with her in her fallen condition. I could not be generous; her conduct about that letter was a little too bad. Perhaps after to-morrow I shall manage to forgive her; but when I think of all Elsie suffered, I am very savage still. The daughters are to be pitied; but don't be too compassionate even to them,—they will fasten themselves on you like incubi, and you will never have a minute to call your own."

"I shall manage; and, besides, they are not always going to live in Oldbury, all four of them. It is time the Connington romance came to an end. I mean to take it in hand."

"Poor Walter Neale! I really think that to give him Mrs. Lutridge for a mother-in-law is rather too severe a punishment to inflict on him for having once had the presumption to fancy himself in love with you."

"We will not discuss that point. There!—look up between the trees; do you see the silver thread of crescent moon in the sky—your moon and Elsie's? You will be walking up and down here together when it is a silver bow again, and Papa and I shall have started on the Italian tour we are to have before we settle down at Laurel House for the rest of our lives. Your father is calling you from the window. I will take just one more turn by myself before I go in."

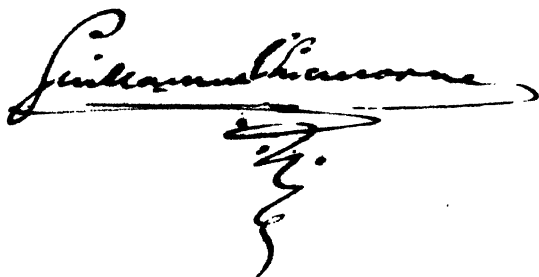
Cecil left the shaded elm walk when Stephen entered the house, and went to a more open part of the garden, from whence she could see part of the town of Oldbury hanging out its lights now, the irregular roof-lines broken here and there by groups of trees already showing the spring sap in their swelling branches. It was a pretty, peaceful, thoroughly English-looking place, very pleasant to eyes that had wearied over the colourless, dusty sheen of Eastern cities.

There was both sadness and content in Cecil's heart as she

looked. "Little city of my dwelling-place on this side the grave," she said to herself, quoting Jean Paul's address to Bayreuth. The words had a strange pathos to her, and unexpected tears started to her eyes. She dashed them away the next minute, smiling at herself. What was there to be pathetic about? It was not particularly likely, after all, that she and her father should go on living in Oldbury all the rest of their lives, and even if they did—— Cecil paused to consider the prospect steadily. She did not quite like to acknowledge it to herself, and yet there was an undefined feeling in her mind that the ceremony she was to witness the day after to-morrow was something of a crisis in her life too, and would make the plan of life to which women usually turn when they think of a change coming to them look distasteful to her. There was no one but herself to blame if she had formed an idea of what she wished the closest companionship of her life to be that was not to be realized, and found that she could not change it. What then? The even flowing life, without any great event in it, which she believed she saw stretched out before her did not look gray, but very sunshiny and sweet. Her steps quickened, and her cheek glowed with the warmth that came to her heart as she pictured the years with her father, and planned how she would throw herself heart and soul into the interests his active mind would be sure to create round him even here in Oldbury, and be so much in his work that she should never quite know how much failing health and coming infirmities were lessening his capacities for active employment. Then how much brighter her uncle's existence should be for her being at hand to supply the places that perhaps ought not to have been left vacant. There was something very sweet to her in the charge thus left her; it seemed to associate her in the work of reparation to which Margaret Blake had dedicated her life. There would be pain; her father's health was shattered, he was an old man long before the time, and there must always be pain in following and waiting on the steps of a declining life, however sacred and sweet the task may be. At the end of this slope, which Cecil hoped to smooth and brighten for the two relatives to whom the next years of her life were to be dedicated, there lay what must be a gulf of pain for her, at which she need not look just yet. What she did see was the path beyond it, not downwards, but upwards, stretching on to greater heights of self-conquest and endeavour, when, having no one of her own kindred to devote herself to, she could, as Margaret Blake had done, make kindred

of all who suffered. Far off in the distance of her life she saw that possibility, and it shone upon her with a light that seemed to be reflected from Margaret Blake's face.

"How little I thought that summer when I first came to Oldbury, and used to wonder about her so much, that the prospect of growing like her would ever seem to me a hope to be struggled for," she said to herself. And just then Mr. Pierrepont came to the library door and called to her to come in, and she ran to the house, making up her mind that it should not be often she would allow herself leisure to live in anticipation through her whole life, in an idle hour.



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